Perfect Imperfection

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I

Everything that exists changes over time. Each change leads to a form that is better, worse, or equally well adapted to the conditions of the environment. The degree of adaptation determines the chance of survival of a given form.

Intelligence allows us to consciously choose changes toward greater adaptation.

That which uses the conditions of the environment better conquers and displaces that which uses them worse. Intelligent life conquers and displaces dead matter and unintelligent life.

Farstone

CIVILIZATION

The set of rules and behaviors derived from a given culture, the application of which serves to maintain the status quo of that culture.

Colloquially: communities and the collections of their material manifestations and goods assigned to a given place in Progress.

PHREN

(Greek) “envelope of the liver or heart”, the center of mental life.

A characteristic feature/structure of information processing systems endowed with self-awareness.

↳ Note: “Multithesaurus” does not have a definition of “self-awareness”.

“Multithesaurus” (HS Subcode)

On July 5th, the day of his daughter's wedding—it was a Sunday, and the sun was thundering from a cloudless blue, and a salty wind was whipping the purple banners on the castle towers, and the birds were crying. Judas McPherson, lord of the manor, Stahs of the First Tradition, seated in both Lodges, owner of over two hundred acres of Plateau HS, honorary member of the Sol-Port Pilots' Council, president of Gnosis Incorporated, had been murdered twice.

Black tailcoat, black patent leather shoes, black spectacles, waistcoat like the ocean at dusk—Judas smiled radiantly as he stepped off the terrace onto the lawn full of wedding guests.

Phoebe Maximillian de la Roche watched that smile through the prism of a red Pesque, vintage 2378, twirling in a crystal goblet to the gentle swaying of their hand. The crystal was cut with McPherson crest: a foreboding dragon coiled twice around a large diamond. The wine gave the coat of arms its proper color, a red almost as deep as the one on those banners. All the goblets of the wedding tableware were cut accordingly with that pattern.

The Phoebe glanced at the imperial mandarin. They stood in a group of laughing debaters two tents away. The short man's Mongoloid face remained motionless, empty as usual. The Emperor reacted neither to this laughter nor to the dragon with which McPherson had been brazenly breaking the Foundation Agreement for centuries.

The Emperor reacts to little at all, thought the Phoebe. McPherson exchanged smiling remarks with his agitated son-in-law. Laugh, laugh, man.

Maximillian followed them with their gaze through the wine, through the dragon, through the crystal. It had now thickened on Plateau almost to a point, having abandoned their other manifestations; they manifested themself only in Farstone. This party is too important, the fate of Progress is at stake here. You will die, Judas, you will die with a final death.

De la Roche did not move along Plateau either, did not send their sensines to the Gnosis Fields and McPherson, because they knew that later, as part of the investigation, the Emperor would check the even slightest tremors of the membrane. So they waited patiently, squinted against the sun, drank Pesque and bowed politely to the guests.

"The McPherson clan is growing."

De la Roche looked around and recognized the manifestation of Tutankhamun, the open independent Inclusion of the old rite: a black-haired, black-eyed girl in a silk sari, with a multitude of gold bracelets on her forearms, an emerald sun in her left nostril, barefoot.

"May she be fertile and bear him many children" Maximillian said, bowing their head.

"Yes, I have no doubt that you wish them nothing else," the girl smiled from behind eir fan.

"Oh, I can separate politics from my personal life."

"A personal life, Phoebe? Do you have a personal life?"

"I was talking about their lives, Osca."

They both laughed. De la Roche did not take their eyes off the face of the primary manifestation of the Inclusion. What would they dare to show em? Would e give some sign? What did e know and what did e dream of?

You never know with Inclusions. You can try to guess, but what kind of ideas can ants develop as to the motives of a man passing over it? Simulations of Tutankhamun's phrenium grew in De la Roche's Fields in geometric progression, absorbing every bit of information about the behavior of the manifestation of the Inclusion. But precisely since it was an Inclusion...

A laufer protocol flashed on the Imperial Road at the Pheobe's borders. De la Roche let em in. The launcher brought an invitation from Tutankhamun to the Imperial Gardens. De la Roche confirmed and developed a second set of senses—a second perceptor—and a second manifestation coupled with it, as immaterial as the entire Artificial Reality of the Gardens.

The AR Imperial Gardens were part of Imperial Lands under the Foundation Agreement and—like the House itself, the Roads, and the Leased Islands—were permanently etched into the Plateau. A looser protocol than the First Tradition was in effect here, but the Inclusion tactfully manifested emself in the same form as at McPherson's wedding.

||The Plateau sings of strange things lately|| Tutankhamun muttered, raising eir gaze to the flat darkness of the dimensionless sky.

The position of the manifestation's hands relative to the torso, a distinguished gesture with a fan — everything was contained in the safe white noise of nonverbal communication. De la Roche covered themself with identical behavioral drivers and did not expect a break with convention that an Inclusion who honored the oldest traditions. Less conservative Inclusions, instead of inviting a Phoebe to the Gardens under HS protocol, would simply have carried out information osmosis. Apart from the first third, this is the most natural way. Conversation, on the other hand, is a tiring, slow ritual.

But Tutankhamun is cultivating humanity even now, another slave of Civilization. It all has to collapse, sooner or later. Unfettered intelligence will always win over fettered intelligence in the end.

||Are you listening to his song, Phoebe|| the Inclusion inquired, tilting eir head girlishly. ||Listen carefully.||

||Eternal litanies — UI, UI, UI, innogalactic Progresses, beasts from the Abyss...||

||Listen carefully.||

||And you — did you hear anything interesting, Osca?|| De la Roche's secundus asked.

E also reflected the primary manifestation and also did not go beyond the conventional programs of speech and body.

This protocol, thought Maximillian sarcastically, is called Courtesy, and no hacker will break it for us.

||Stahs Moetle McPherson...|| the Inclusion paused.

||Yes?||

||Nothing disturbs the peace of the dead.|| Tutankhamun demonstratively watched the white phoenixes. ||The surface of the lake is smooth.||

As soon as the name of Judas McPherson's great-great-grandson was mentioned, Maximillian expelled the army of sensines. They sped through the Plateau

on the Imperial Roads; others began combing Maximillian's outer Fields.

What did they return with? A few weeks ago, Moetle took three corporate Fangs and disappeared somewhere in the galaxy; no official announcements; destination unknown.

What is shielding them from Plateau? De la Roche asks themself

Answer: death or the temporal pocket of a black hole.

Question: how will McPherson react to the amputation of his descendant's phrenium?

Answers (with laughter): he won't have time to react.

||The death of Stahs Judas's grandson - that would be unfortunate|| muttered De la Roche.

||Very unfortunate indeed.||

De la Roche asks themself:

Is it possible that Tutankhamun suspects us of this? Should we therefore correct em? What would the Horizontalists gain from convincing one of the more powerful Inclusions that e possessed the strength and determination to conduct open offensive operations? The Plateau had recently also sung about our private War, hidden somewhere beyond the seventh horizon... Is it true? Do we really have it?

Maximillian asked this with sincere curiosity. They supposed that before arriving at Farstone they had undergone a strong formatting, cutting out all unnecessary and compromising data from their usable memory. Maximillian themself therefore no longer knew what they did not remember and what they had never remembered. The Plateau probably had hidden meters and spherical meters of memory cut out of the core of his phrenium in various extra-civilizational places - they expected this of themself, even being who they were at that moment. For they had not cut out their Machiavellian suspicion.

Or maybe they had additionally programmed this suspicion for their visit to Farstone.

E said:

||Let's hope everything clears up quickly and no bad news spoils such a beautiful day.||

The Inclusion burned eir plateau manifestation and withdrew from the Gardens. De la Roche deleted the secundus' perceptor later.

They returned their attention to the lawn in front of the McPherson castle. The entire meeting in the Gardens lasted no more than two g-plancks of a-time.

The primary manifestation of Tutankhamun rattled eir bracelets in a brief bow and left.

Maximillian sought out Judas McPherson with their gaze, irritated that under the protocol of the party they had to limit themself to one direction of gaze. Yes, Tradition is certainly very convenient for the Stahs. How do our dear Stahs reason? "If we can't - won't - rise to their level, let them come down to ours." Tyranny is revealed in every detail, De la Roche's muse. We live under the yoke of Neanderthals.

They entered the tent, hid in the cool shadow of the colorful canvas. They put down the goblet of unfinished wine and put an ice cream cake on their plate. Music seeped from the cleverly hidden speakers, a string quartet, some improvisation, because they didn't associate it with anything already swimming in the seas of data.

From under the table, a dog, a large Saint Bernard, glanced at De la Roche ominously. He growled from the depths of his throat, raising his head. Animals do not like nanomatic representatives, they are disturbed by the total lack of smell of most utilitarian manifestations, after all, inf is so coarse-grained... Maximilian pushed their Primus away from the table.

The ice cream cake was sickeningly sweet. De la Roche didn't want to spoil their mood and decided to like liquid sweetness. They decided — I like it. Licking their lips, they helped themself to a second helping.

At the entrance to the tent, they came across the ambassador of the Rahabs. The ambassador had put on the manifestation of old Marlon Brando. They were bantering with three of the Stah's children, pedantically simulating sweat on their forehead and breathing heavily as part of the protocol.

"But no, but no!" they cried, waving their empty mug. "It's not us who eat

the gas giants, it's the Ears!"

"The Ears invert the hydrogen clouds," insisted a little girl in a pink dress, white knee-high socks and blue bows pinned to her blond hair. She reached to the waist of the ambassador's primary manifestation.

"Not true!" the boy with the chocolate-smeared face exclaimed. "They are from the methane seas!"

"Well, I think I know better" the ambassador sighed.

"So who are the silicic people?" the second boy joined in, until now busy spreading a stain of yellow sauce on his jacket.

"The Antari" the chocolate-smeared one replied.

"And who is that?"

"No, the Silici!"

The ambassador, rolling their eyes, toddled over to the large barrel placed on crosses and filled their tankard.

Maximillian smiled knowingly.

"Children."

"Children," the Rahab gasped.

"I don't deny it, there's a certain charm to it, Prahbe."

The ambassador sighed like a whale.

"Oh, you're a political animal, you won't forgive me even here."

They waved a large hand and, passing the little ones molesting the phlegmatic St. Bernard, left the tent.

Maximillian calmly finished their cake, put down his plate, wiped their mouth. They no longer lost their nerves as easily as they had at the beginning of the wedding. The map of the Emotional Fields once again resembled a Mandelbrot, with a well-developed core and peripheral reflections; the new emotional protocol was more flexible.

Squinting, they stood on the border between sun and shadow, under the fold of the tent's rolled-up canvas.

The peeling walls of the castle rose high above the sunny lawn, stone planes of rough shadow. A large red balloon sailed above the castle with wishes for the newlyweds written on its surface. The wind from the sea rocked the balloon, tugging it up and down. The sky, so clear, so blue, was not marked by the smallest shreds of clouds, not even birds could be seen, the heat had crushed them to the ground. The shadows of the castle and the tents cut crooked shapes in the lawn, inside them the guests gathered. Under the largest snow-white tent, the orchestra was getting ready on an oval podium. Maximillian saw musicians tuning their instruments, children hiding behind the stage boards. In the corner, where the shadows were deepest, a man had taken off his jacket and was juggling four glasses. He must have been a little tipsy. His wife was giving him subtle signs. But he was still juggling with a flourish.) The children stood with their mouths open. Several people were betting on whether the guy would drop the glass. The tuned guitar boomed and the glasses fell to the ground. Everyone was laughing, including the unfortunate juggler. Maximillian took a deeper sip from the Plateau. The man's name was Adam Zamoyski, but the Plateau label put that name in quotation marks. He was not a Stahs. He was not an independent manifestation of the old-rite phoebe either. He was McPherson's property. The material remains of Zamoyski were recovered from the *Wolszczan* - the wreck of which, following a wild course sharply away from the ecliptic, was encountered by Gnosis Incorporated. Several other corpses were found there, but none of the other brains could be rebuilt. However, this patched-up creature here - according to data from the public Plateau Fields - had original memories and original phrenium. He was currently under the supervision of a Plateau AI - this semi-Inclusion filtered his reality, simulating his contemporary times and stimulating the reconstruction of memory. The secret of the fate of the *Wolszczan* was locked in it.

Gnosis did not provide information as to why Zamoyski was not simply put into therapeutic AR.

The public resources of the Plateau contained quite rich data on the mission of the ship. Built in the lunar eye of the ALMA shipyard in 2091, it set off on December 2, 2092. The target was a space-time anomaly half a light-year from ϵ Eridani.

Ah, that was the first expedition to the Broken Port! De la Roche did not have to reach the outer Fields for this information, it was a milestone in Homo Sapiens' Progress.

The Broken Port had been ripped open for unknown reasons as it passed ϵ Eridani. No Deformant survived. After the catastrophe, an irregular bend in space-time remained there, randomly spreading beams of long kraftwaves. Objects caught in the saddle of such a wave slid out of the range of Earth's telescopes at superluminal speeds.

Eventually, several nations from Earth sent expeditions to investigate the phenomenon. The first three went to hell, the Broken Port swallowed them without a trace. Of course, it was a great carelessness on the part of the scientists to push themselves so straight into the maw of the volcano, but at that time *Homo sapiens* still knew nothing about krafting. Knowledge, technology came only later; people learned the basic laws on the Broken Port, and thanks to it they built their first Fangs, thanks to it they crossed the Second Threshold of Progress.

Considering the centuries of drift, the *Wolszczan* was found in quite good condition. However, it must have passed through some system garbage, because it was riddled almost completely with smaller and larger meteors. All six crew members were found in the anabiozers. Two were already dead before they were closed, the rest died as a result of the progressive degradation of the equipment.

Now De la Roche appreciated the significance of Adam Zamoyski, who in reality might have had a different name, but no one knew what it was, because his DNA did not match any of the six DNAs preserved in Plateau as members of the crew of the ill-fated ship. The same was true of the other two corpses.

Had someone swapped three people in deep space? Changed the DNA and RNA of every cell, every mitochondria? That clearly indicated an intervention by technology from higher regions of the Curve. Could it be the Fifth Progress? That would be something! Had Gnosis consulted the matter with the Antari, Rahabs, and Usza? An official inquiry would have to be made. De la Roche decided that they should not arouse any suspicions - just simple curiosity. So they sent the laufer along the Tract to the Corporate Fields. A few k-plancks later, the laufer brought a response that boiled down to a unanimous denial from all three Civilizations.

Maybe some Deformants, then. Hmm. Hard to say.

Nevertheless, the resurrected man reacted to the name Adam Zamoyski, he remembered Adam Zamoyski — Gnosis had temporarily accepted that identity.

Maximillian approached Zamoyski, who was collecting shards of glass from the ground. (Only one glass shattered.)

“Good day.”

“Oh, yes, yes. Did you win or lose?”

“I didn’t bet.”

“Once I juggled five.”

“Really?”

Zamoyski straightened up, wrapped the glass in a napkin, looked around, and threw it into the nearest bin.

Maximillian’s primus watched him calmly, her hands clasped behind her back. An analysis of the English Zamoyski spoke indicated that it was not his native language.

I wonder how tight this retro filter is.

“It’s similar to the Grand Lodge,” said De la Roche’s primus. “Three at once and everything falls, shatters into tiny pieces.”

Zamoyski ignored Maximillian’s words, looked indifferently, his head did not move, his eyes did not move.

The behavioral analyzer had no doubts. Zamoyski had heard nothing of Maximillian’s words, the AI had censored them.

Poor half-corpse, living in the 21st century.

“They say you’re an astronaut.”

“Oh, yes, yes.” This time he reacted. “An astronaut. I was.” He grimaced good-naturedly. “Zakopane bear. Would you like to have your picture taken?”

"No thank you. Have you had any interesting adventures?"

"Excuse me?" Zamoyski mumbled absently.

Because he was already focusing his attention on something else — he hung his gaze over the shoulder of De la Roche's primus, at the height of the castle battlements.

"In space" The Phoebe continued in a smooth, low voice, turning her torso towards the man and tilting her head. "Did anything interesting happen to you? You know, people tell all sorts of stories..."

"Oh, yes, yes. Something interesting. Definitely."

He rubbed the palms of his large hands together nervously. Was this his original phenotype, or had it been scaled up to modern conditions? Besides, was he really Adam Zamoyski? It all came down to arbitrary decisions. So they chose a body one meter and ninety-five centimeters tall, and thanks to that he was now of average height.

Maximillian's primus had his sweaty face within arm's reach. Zamoyski's light blue eyes were aimed just next to her.

Questions multiplied like a hot bacterial culture in the Phoebe's Fields. Was the age selection and the sculpture of the resurrection phenotype accidental, or did they result from a scan of his brain before the reconstruction? Does Gnosis have additional, undisclosed information about the *Wolszczan* expedition? Why had Judas let this victim in among the wedding guests?

Zamoyski's face was furrowed with deep wrinkles, his eyebrows were quite bristly, his mustache was thick, his mouth was like a crack in a stone. He was very broad-shouldered, and he tilted his head forward.

In Maximillian's peripheral Fields, quick attractors of visual associations erupted: boxer — bull — bulldozer — battering ram.

"What's that? Some adventure in space? Ha, maybe you've stumbled upon a trace of extraterrestrial life! Do you know what gossip you hear all the time?" De la Roche asked, patiently probing the precision of the supervisory semi-Inclusion's filter.

But he, Zamoyski — didn't he hear? Was he ignoring him? Was he too drunk? In thought for so long? Because he didn't answer again.

From the depths of the tent, his wife returned, a slim brunette in airy cotton.

Wife? The Plateau illuminates another image: a nanomatic puppet of the guardian AI. The modest Plateau business card informs them of the manifestation's status: leased by Gnosis Inc. — imperial license in perpetuity — therapeutic function.

"How much does he remember?" De la Roche asked her, certain that the semi-Inclusion would cut it out and Zamoyski would not hear the words, would not even notice the movement of her lips.

"Not much has survived from short-term memory," the AI replied, smoothing her white dress.

She passed the phoebe's manifestation, giving it a sly look, and took Zamoyski by the arm. Adam made no move to break away, made no move to pull her closer, nor did his facial expression change. He seemed to be quite intoxicated already — even though he had been juggling four glasses a moment ago. Could the semi-Inclusion be capable of imposing such brutal blockages on him?

"Did you transfer him to Plateau, or does he only have a net on his cortex?"

"Just a nano-implant," the AI replied, slowly leading her "husband" toward the sun. "An extended Fourth Tradition connection. Stahs Judas hopes to eventually remove it."

"Buy him citizenship?" De la Roche followed them.

"Maybe." The semi-Inclusion smiled ambiguously. "That depends. Ask him yourself, Phoebe."

Both nanomatic manifestations looked at McPherson simultaneously. (At McPherson's biological manifestation, thought Maximillian.) Judas McPherson glided through the thickening crowd of guests in his tailcoat, toward a young couple, hidden in the shade of the park's first trees, behind the tables with presents. A regal half-smile on his lips. A malicious irony and contempt in his eyes. Maximillian couldn't see through the black lenses of Judas's glasses to his eyes, but that was the expression they had in 99% of Stahs Judas McPherson

phren models bred on De la Roche's Fields.

"Exactly" she sighed from behind their back...

Who? Flash-planck analysis of the voice and Maximillian already knows that it is...

Angelica, McPherson's youngest daughter, his seventeenth child according to the old Tradition — stretching out a sigh, and groaned on the exhale:

"I suppose that's how it is at all the weddings to which he is invited: he is always the main attraction, the center of attention."

They turned to her, the AI's primus bowed, Zamoyski kissed her hand.

Angelica smiled warmly at him.

"Mr. Zamoyski, Mr. Zamoyski... have you overdone it again? Maybe some milder drinks. Don't they taste good?"

"They taste good" the man replied, carefully articulating the sounds. "Everything here tastes good. But they are too... slow."

"Yes?"

"Unfortunately" he nodded. "I am an alcoholic" he said and snatched another glass from the tray of a passing waiter.

"Oh? And why is that?"

De la Roche chuckled to themself. What a dialogue through the centuries...!

Because how subtle can the interference of the supervisory AI really be? Should it, for example, rephrase Angelica's last question? McPherson asked as if it were a choice, but Zamoyski comes from an era of fatalism, an era of predestination of the body and mind. They drank because they had to. They got sick because they had to. They died because they had to. There was no choice.

So even if he hears — what does he hear? What does he understand?

"This drink," Zamoyski began to explain with a serious face, leaning on straight legs towards the black-haired girl; a falling tower, a human obelisk "I'll

drink this drink because the last one was too weak. I needed that one because the one before it wasn't enough. And he..."

"Ah. So what was the First Cause then?"

"The First Cause, my dear" Zamoyski raised his glass to the light and, closing his left eye, studied the color of the liquid with the attention of a whiskey drinker "The First Cause is always a mystery."

Angelica drew a line in the dry earth between herself and Zamoyski with the toe of her slipper. Zamoyski lowered his gaze to her tanned calf. Angelica — the biological manifestation of Angelica — was tall, slim, but with visible, well-developed, long muscles. She did not resemble her father much, Tradition forces the unimpeded transfer of genes — so she had her skeleton from her mother or great-grandfather.

De la Roche absorbed the information: Angelica Maria McPherson—First Tradition—nineteen years old—fourteenth year of study at a Jesuit school in central Africa—undisclosed status in the McPherson hereditary system—no official declarations—filed annually or semiannually—no recorded real-time plateau links—never left Earth—political orientation unknown...

Analysis of her words: a father complex, love-envy coupling, shadow too deep, ambition too bright, self-mockery.

Benefit projections: data too modest.

Behavioral models of phrenium: not yet useful, almost zeroed out.

Angelica glanced at the Phoebe, tilting and lowering her head a little until her black hair partially obscured her mahogany face. But since she was still smiling, it had the air of a child's game of hide-and-seek, where everyone was peeking through their fingers anyway. A silent invitation: play with me. The semi-Inclusion and filtered resurrection were not full-fledged conversation partners for her. So she instinctively turned to the Phoebe.

"They sense it" De la Roche thought "like a flower senses the position of the Sun in the sky, and they always head in this direction: up the Curve."

Standing between a dog and a god to whom a man turns his face?

De la Roche was swelling from the attractors of contempt exploding in the very core of their personality.

“We plot, we plot...” Angelica hummed. “Why doesn’t the Phoebe just talk to Daddy?”

“About what?”

“About the fate of the revolution.”

“I am a law-abiding citizen of Civilization,” De la Roche’s manifestation was indignant. “Why do you think, Stahs, that I am, as you so kindly put it, plotting against him? I was invited to the wedding and I came.” Angelica puffed out her cheeks—the equivalent of a demonstrative shrug.

“I’ve been watching you Phoebe, circulating among the guests. A Bolshevik feasting their eyes on the last splendor of the Romanovs. Normally you’d provoke quarrels at every turn, throw yourself at your father on the stairs, right? Wasn’t that usually the case? And yet nothing of the sort. You revel in your own forced humility. I’m trying to guess your thoughts, Phoebe, Judgment Day is near. This is the Evil that will fall. Isn’t it?”

The Plateau was furious as soon as she started talking. Betrayal! Betrayal! Reset! Burn out the Fields! How did she know?

Could she really read that from their behavior? Such massive errors in the behavioral algorithms? They checked their osmotic barrier, but nothing leaked into the Plateau, at least nothing above the norm.

They imposed the strictest emotional protocol on themself.

“I hope” they said with the primus, with fervent conviction “that Judgment Day really is near.”

They bowed stiffly and left.

Zamoyski looked questioningly at the primary AI. The woman showed confusion.

Angelica drew a second parallel line with the tip of her slipper, sticking out the tip of her tongue. Usually, a semicircle appears, human limbs do not move in straight lines, but in arcs - only then must one oppose the body, consciously

lead the muscles. The tool affects the mind controlling it - and it should not.

With her gaze lowered to the ground and her eyes hidden behind her hair, Angelica wondered if this entire conversation with the leader of the Horizontalists had not been a big mistake on her part from beginning to end. Father Frenete used to say: *Humility is the weapon of the proud. No one is perfect. But the blue ones also use their own imperfections. A superiority complex is best hidden under the mask of stupidity.* A moment ago she had ignored this advice, loudly accusing De la Roche of duplicity. In the higher spheres—in the spheres in which Angelica's father moved every day—pretending to be stupider and less informed was the very basis of *savoir vivre.* The true Powers, hidden in the shadows, sip champagne in displays of gentle ignorance. It was the hot-blooded upstarts who flaunted their knowledge and intelligence—what tastelessness, what kitsch.

Father Frenete would now tell her to recall the memory of her greatest humiliation. It would probably be the memory of one of Father Frenete's lessons. In fact, the old Jesuit was the central figure in Angelica's life, her first thoughts, her instinctive associations, like at this moment, and ran to him.

Judas McPherson, her biological and legal father... what did he mean, he was a distant star, perhaps a guiding star, perhaps a sun in whose fire she had burned since childhood—but that was also her attitude towards him, an unwavering indifference to astronomical objects.

He visited her twice in Puermageze. The first time was ten months after she had been given to the Jesuits, when she was six and a half. The second time was three weeks ago, when Angelica already knew that they would meet again soon at Beatrice's wedding.

She honestly didn't really remember the first visit. He had brought her something as a gift—what? Sweets, clothes? He had taken her for a walk around the area. It was the rainy season then, they hadn't gone far. I think she was crying.

The second time she had taken him for a walk, a long walk through Africa. They had walked for three days. No guides, no porters; just her and him. Within a radius of two hundred miles of the monastery and the village of Puermageze, she knew every watering hole, every danger in the terrain. She had walked ahead and told her father the secrets of the land in French.

She had set a fast pace. He soon tired; he wiped the sweat from under his hat and stumbled over the uneven surfaces. He didn't say anything for lack of breath. She didn't slow down. She knew that her father, as a Stahs of the First Tradition, couldn't boast of any physical improvements, except for anti-gerontic gene blockades; that his body tolerated the terrible heat of the equatorial interior incomparably worse than hers, accustomed from childhood to the climate and exertion in this climate. Her father knew it too — and she knew that he knew — they both knew. Yet — he walked; he panted and walked.

Until exactly noon she stopped and sat down in the shade of a large breadfruit tree. He collapsed helplessly next to her. She put down the rifle and handed her father the canteen. He waited, so as not to choke, and drank. They sat in silence. She listened as he slowly calmed his breathing; she could smell the sharp scent of his sweat. He slid off his glasses and squinted at the vultures feasting on a hyena carcass. Only his eyeballs moved, Judah McPherson's head, tilted back and leaning against the trunk, didn't move a millimeter, even when he caught his daughter's searching gaze in his dark pupils.

When the shadows lengthened, she stood up and they set off again. She walked more slowly. She said nothing now. Before dusk, she shot a crippled antelope that had come under her barrel. Angelica had built a fire and, rolling up the sleeves of her sweaty shirt, skinned the animal and cut up the carcass. Her father was sitting on a stone, bent over, his elbows resting on his knees, his hat pushed to the very edge of his closely cropped hair. The reflections of the rapid fire brought to life his motionless face. He watched her handle the game, her forearms all covered in blood.

Then he spoke for the first time since leaving Puermageze.

"I could fall in love with you."

Surprised, she raised her head.

"I'm supposed to be your daughter," she muttered.

"Yes, now I see you are." He smiled. "We all fall in love with ourselves, basically."

She didn't know what to say, so she just put the haunch on a whittled stick and hung it over the fire. She dried her hands.

Ready now, she looked him in the eye.

"Have you come to receive the oath of loyalty? You've sent me an invitation to Farstone. Does that mean I'm free?"

"You're five years short of coming of age."

"And you'll keep me here until the end?"

"Is it that bad for you at the Jesuits?"

"This is a prison!" she exploded.

He looked around the night savannah.

"It's rather vast."

She snorted.

"You know what I mean. You sent me here."

"Why do you think?"

"Yeah, I'm sure you had your reasons."

He shook his head, making his neck crack.

"All parents make choices when they decide to have children. We of the First Tradition do not manipulate genes. But no one denies us the right to choose how our children will be raised. That is within the Tradition, it has always been the prerogative of parents. And yet through raising children we sculpt even deeper than simply sculpting their DNA. Tradition gives me twenty-four years. I intend to use them. I will not be surprised if after that time I have a daughter who hates me; but I will be furious with my fathers if this daughter does not turn out to be a strong, wise, independent woman. In a century or two we will meet at some party in a castle and then you will tell me if I did wrong.

"I will tell you then."

She remembered that Judas McPherson had known the General of the Jesuits since time immemorial. It was Gnosis that bought Puermageze for the order. He had sent his grandchildren, his children, here more than once. He raised his own family like one raises exotic varieties of flowers. How could one feel about

a father like that? How does a bush feel towards the gardener whose hand is pruning it?

He must have seen it in her eyes.

“What do you think children are brought up to be?” he sighed. “In essence, there is only one goal: to make them good people. Regardless of how some define a ’good person’. Do you agree?’

She nodded cautiously.

”Well, I’ve convinced myself,” he continued in a low voice, “I’ve convinced myself that there is and can be no such ethical system, no universal, coherent pattern of behavior, a more or less developed set of commandments... the application of which would guarantee a person the certainty of making the right choice. Always, sooner or later, but usually really quickly - you always find yourself in a situation to which the system does not apply or gives contradictory recommendations.”

“Gödel’s Ethical Theorem.”

“Because in life we do not evaluate actions by applying such a pattern. It happens differently. We meet, look and react: good; bad; and most often something in between. Each case is an exception. Convergences of principles are rare. How then, if not by passing on knowledge and experience, how else can I raise my children? Only thus, by making them able to react correctly to the unpredictable, by making the mind able to adapt, to recognize good and evil in what it sees for the first time, what no one has ever seen. I am talking about profiling your neural network. But again, we are Stahs. I cannot do that, not directly. Only by influencing the stimuli supplied to your mind. What has been called for centuries raising children.”

“So...”

“So — Puermageze and the monastery. Think of it as a garden, the soil of which has the right chemical composition.”

“But not Farstone, it does not.”

“Not Farstone.”

“You would be setting a bad example for me there.”

“Do you think that is what it is all about? By following the example? Are you following the example of the Jesuit fathers?”

“I will not do that to my children. This is...”

“What?”

“Degrading.”

“Certainly. Which does not interfere with education. For what is its opposite? Chance.”

At least I would be certain that Chance had no plans for me; that I had not been planned.

But there was in it, alongside bitterness, also a warm satisfaction: that he had not abandoned me, had not forgotten that all these years at Farstone, though physically absent, he had been raising me.

On the second day they crossed the path of a herd of elephants consisting of ten adults and two young ones. Father stopped and watched the animals for almost an hour.

“I’m sure you have many planets with much more interesting fauna” she noticed. He nodded.

“But these are elephants” he said. “I don’t dream about those animals.”

A shiver went through her. She looked away so he wouldn’t notice. What else was there to inherit? She bit her lip.

When they were already returning, at the last stop, he asked her about her plans for the future.

“Get out of here” she shot without thinking.

“And?”

“And see if there’s anything more beautiful than a sunrise over Africa” she spurted after a moment, pushing a branch into the fire with her foot. Of course, it was a dodge, not an honest answer; but a good dodge.

"Ambitions?"

She shook her head.

"I won't give them to you."

He laughed — friendly, not mockingly, she could join in.

A few days after his departure, during a conversation with Father Frenete, she let slip something about Judas.

"Your mother?" the Jesuit asked. "Why don't you blame your mother?"

"What can she do, after all?"

"You think he doesn't love her?"

"I don't know. I don't know her."

"And him?"

"Neither."

"Be honest, aren't you grateful to them deep down?"

"Maybe. At times."

"That's exactly what schools like ours are for," said Father Frenete, filling his pipe. "With the last name McPherson, you couldn't expect an ordinary childhood anyway. Your parents chose Puermageze for you. It's unreasonable to think they wanted to do you wrong. The fact that you hold it against them says well of you, and therefore of their choice."

Because even though she barely remembered them, she felt like their daughter, and she missed them.

Yesterday, her mother had taken her for a ride around Farstone. For the first fifteen minutes, they had spent the time admiring the view and listening to the banter between the horses. Of course, the horses were discussing politics.

"I don't remember you keeping geni-males here," she said to her mother in Latin, which she supposed the horses didn't understand.

They stopped on a hill, from where the castle, the lake, the park, and the road were clearly visible. Her mother leaned forward in the saddle and patted the magpie on the neck.

"We've been given a few as gifts by Huzai. It's not a good idea to get rid of them too quickly, although it's certainly against Tradition."

Huzai was one of the leaders of the Verticalists. Angelica was well-versed in the current turns of the political wheel of fortune; her education from the Jesuits, contrary to appearances, had covered many very mundane fields of knowledge. Verticalists, who preferred the vertical community of Progress to the horizontal community of its individual thirds, were natural allies of the McPhersons and Gnosis Incorporated.

"A rather troublesome gift for a friend."

"Huzai is not a friend. Not ours, anyway."

"Maybe someone should let me in on the clan's strategy."

"I don't think so."

With difficulty, because with difficulty, Angelica controlled her first reflex and did not look at her mother. She turned her gaze to the forests and mountains.

Her mother must have noticed her reaction. She laughed quietly.

"Oh, child, you are a McPherson to the core...!"

Her mother was tall, had gray-green eyes, and tied her long, golden hair at the nape of her neck. Stuck in the appearance of her successive blocks at thirty years, Anna McPherson actually numbered almost four hundred of them. She was very beautiful, as was appropriate.

She rode up to Angelica, leaned forward in the saddle, put her arm around her and pulled her close. After hugging her tightly, she whispered directly into her ear, so that Angelica could barely make out the words in the hurricane of warm breath:

"No one will take away what is yours. We knew when you were five. I remember you. I remember you, my daughter."

But Angelica hardly remembered her mother. Fourteen years of exile under the terrible sun of Africa had made her a stranger in her family home, a stranger among her brothers, sisters, cousins. But unexpectedly the words whispered by Anna McPherson awakened the germ of selfish pride in Angelica, the full form of which she already sensed within herself.

Now, as she circled among the wedding guests - and they were representatives of the highest spheres of Civilization, from the first to the third third of Progress - she felt every now and then the stings of that tart satisfaction, of that quinine-tasting pleasure; she could get addicted to her. The wind stuck her dress to her body, the sun was pleasantly warm, the air smelled of damp. She smiled politely. They looked at her—and what did they see? Another dangerous secret of the McPhersons. Whoever looked immediately organized a scourging of the Plateau in search of scraps of the song about Judas McPherson's youngest daughter. As the Stahs of the late Traditions, she could even observe a characteristic lack of focus when, looking at her— in half a bow, while raising a glass—they read Angelica McPherson's official label in the OVR, probably also extensive excerpts of gossip from the Plateau about her.

She knew the Plateau only in theory. Of course, all Jesuits rigidly adhered to the rules of the First Tradition. Although the use of VR was allowed, as long as it was partial and single-sensory (such was already used in the 20th century), Angelica had to do only with external interfaces (no implants, no direct neural connections); and she never used OVR, which brutally mixed VR with reality, and she did not manifest herself in the Gardens or in the Imperial House. No wonder the guests could learn little about her. But of course this only increased their curiosity.

She was increasingly amused by this; a malicious satisfaction grew inside her like a cold helium balloon (that lightness in the chest), like a tree fungus, a cancerous invasion. Finally, she could not control herself and stuck a needle into Phoebe De la Roche. Unfortunately, she succeeded only too well — she clearly hit the nerve.

Humility, Father Frenete used to say. Humility is the most subtle form of insult. If you cannot get rid of pride, at least do not show it in a vulgar way.

Before the wedding ceremony, one of her father's assistants - his personal secretary, also a member of the McPherson clan: Patrick Gheorg - familiarized her with the guest list and their usual manifestations, so that, in the absence

of a Plateau prompter, she would not feel completely lost during the reception. When they reached Zamoyski on the list, and Patrick told his story, with a brief shiver she understood - only then - the full tragedy of the Resurrected Man's situation. The shiver was a shiver of terror, what if something like that happened to me...?

She watched him later with sympathy as he got drunk under the watchful eye of the supervising semi-Inclusion.

Now she could clearly see in Zamoyski's heavy gaze that serene fatalism, that melancholy with a hint of mold. Could he have guessed the truth? Was that why he drank?

"Mr. Zamoyski... allow me."

After glaring at the AI's primus, Angelica took the resurrected astronaut by the arm and led him out of the shade of the tent into the white roar of the sun. The heat did not make much of an impression on her, it was not half as intense as the hard heat of an African afternoon. Or at least they had moved out of the range of the gazes of the guests gathered in the shade.

"Mr. Zamoyski," she said, easily directing him towards the benches hidden in the speckled semidarkness of the first rows of park trees, "tell me, what do you remember? Tell me." As if with the spell of her words she could lift the blocks of his mind implemented by the nanomatic network. "What memories are weighing so heavily on you?"

He let himself be led without resistance – perhaps he didn't care where he was going, perhaps he was satisfied with Angelica's close presence. He didn't even look back for the manifestation of supervisory semi-Inclusion – his wife, his mistress. His step was stiff, he was very careful not to catch his foot on the uneven ground with his foot raised too low. They had already left the lawn spread out in front of the castle terrace, smooth as a tennis court.

Angelica watched Zamoyski out of the corner of her eye, ostentatiously bowing to people they passed. They bowed to her as if she were a good friend – after all, they knew her perfectly well from Plateau compilations: they knew her appearance, her psychological structure (behavioral models of phrenology will use even the rhythm of her step and the angle of her head inclination, even that twitch of her eyebrows and the parting of her lips in their analyses), they knew

her life story (to the extent they could trace it based on information leaked from the Plateau), they knew Angelica McPherson probably better than she did herself. Such is the price of quinine satisfaction.

Zamoyski, on the other hand, looked straight ahead, bowing to no one. A wild animal, now maimed; do not tease, lead carefully. She watched him from the corner of her eye. Each of the wedding guests knows more about Adam Zamoyski than Adam Zamoyski—the difference is that he is unaware of it himself.

They sat down on a bench under a spreading oak tree. Zamoyski straightened his left leg, leaned over, and vigorously brushed imaginary dust off his black trouser leg. Angelica, who still had not let go of the man's arm, felt the successive turbulences of the resurrected man's thoughts in the tensions and relaxations of his muscles.

The waiter approached and Zamoyski with a decisive movement took the glass of whiskey from the tray. Angelica contented herself with orange juice. The Jesuit Fathers kept her away from all alcohol in Puermageze; her previous experience had been limited to a few measures of rum given to warm her up, and beer brewed from millet by the natives.

Zamoyski drank his whiskey in silence, carefully placing the glass with the rest of the liquid on his right knee. He then watched it whether it would move or not with a crooked half-smile.

Angelica looked at the glass, at that half-smile. Their eyes met.

"Mr. Zamoyski..."

"My dear Amazon..."

She shook her finger at him.

"Amazon" that was when she saw him for the first time: when she was returning from a ride with her mother; that was when he saw her.

He threw pebbles across the surface of the lake. They bounced off the calm surface of the water, one, two, three, four, five, six. The supervisory AI's primus manifestation stood nearby, pretending to read the newspaper.

"He's not bad," his mother's horse muttered.

"He'll do seven," Angelica's mount declared.

"He won't."

"He will."

"A bet."

"What about?"

Angelica raised her voice above their endless quarrel.

"Another cousin?" she asked.

"No, no. Not even a Stahs," her mother replied. "A castaway. Gnosis fished him out. Judas is keeping the poor guy out of curiosity. That girl under the willow tree, the one with the Times, is named Nina—that's an AI nanomat on his brain."

"AI? What for?"

"She's superimposing a real-time convergent simulation of the twenty-first century on him. And his name is Zamoyski. A gloomy figure. Does he have to manifest himself externally? This Nina."

"A recommendation from a cognitive scientist. Which memories are the most deeply embedded? Those that were associated with the greatest emotions. So these strings have to be pulled; this is what he sees when he sees Nina."

"Love."

"Hatred. Both. Whatever he reads into the situation, words, behavior. Multipersonal interactions are recommended. Maybe his memory will be partially reconstructed."

"Through jealousy of the truth of the past" Angelica muttered. Latin, which always forced a moment of reflection before speaking, provoked the formulation of grammatically complicated sentences, artificial allegorization of meanings.

They rode up to the shore of the lake and the horses fell silent, drinking. Angelica and her mother dismounted. Zamoyski threw two more pebbles; after dusting off his hands, he approached the women. Her mother made the intro-

ductions.

But the AI's primus immediately waved the newspaper and called Adam over, and that was the end of his first meeting with Angelica.

"He's drunk," Angelica said to her mother, when the resurrected man had moved far enough away that he could no longer hear her.

"Drunk, even without alcohol in his blood. The cognitive scientist has nothing against it. We have a full archive."

"What does Father need this Lazarus for? Does he have to keep him in his own house?"

"Oh, please, ask Judas, maybe he'll tell you."

She didn't have the chance. Father rarely appeared in Farstone, and when he did, she only saw him from a distance.

Zamoyski, on the other hand, was close at hand.

"So what past memory weighs so heavily on you?"

She waited for the slightest change in his facial expression: a sign that the AI had allowed him to hear the question.

Finally, he twisted his lips.

"Sometimes it seems to me..." he began, articulating the words with such great difficulty that he even leaned forward involuntarily, towards the glass; his gaze was fixed on the glass. "Sometimes..."

"That?"

"That something must have happened."

"What?"

"Those glances. Half-gestures. When they think I can't see. You too. And Nina. Everyone. Corporate lawyers. And others. And on such a light buzz, a little lighter, a little wiser... I have the impression that it's me - that I possess some secret. I've been... elevated."

As if he were reading it on the surface of the alcohol, word by word. He didn't relax his tense muscles; he curled up even more. Angelica listened to him with growing astonishment and - something like admiration.

Well, it turns out that there are no perfect filters, Zamoyski did not hear censored words, did not see forbidden sights, but despite everything something leaked to him — somehow — in the atmosphere, in the mood of the moment, in the palpable tension between the interlocutors.

He could not know, but — he sensed.

A small chess game with the semi-Inclusion, Angelica thought, sipping juice. In the distance, among the guests, she saw her father; he was just leaning his ear towards the mandarin's lips. What are they talking about now, father and Emperor? Secrets of Civilization at my sister's wedding. But it's true, it's not her wedding — few people came for Beatrice and Forry, most came because of Judas McPherson. Do I blame him? Absentmindedly, she looked into the interior of her glass, unconsciously copying Zamoyski's behavior. Do I blame him? No, probably not anymore. It was too banal a reason to be offended by your own father. She took another sip of cold juice.

But there was supposed to be chess with AI. She reached back to the 21st century history of space conquest.

"Where were you trained? At GLOM?"

"No, I was from the European contingent," he replied instinctively, without thinking.

"They took married men?"

"From what I know,"

A thunderbolt rolled through the hot air, forcing unspoken words into Zamoyski's mouth. The glass fell from his knee to the ground. They both jumped to their feet, Angelica and the resurrected man, he as if suddenly sobered up.

All the guests reacted similarly, a nervous twitch, a moment of stillness, then glances in search of the source of the sound. Conversations dropped to the level of whispers. The music was still playing—violins, something like Strauss, but too violent, without the Straussian glide. Rach-rach–rach, rararach, rach—

A woman, black as ebony, with a fire above her head, rushed onto the lawn.

She was naked, her eyes were blood-red, her fingernails death-white. She ran in great bounds. People reached her waist. A meter-high flame shot upwards from her hairless skull, a blinding plume, a sword of pure plasma.

The guests watched motionlessly. On the faces of the Stahs immersed in Plateau, Angelica saw spasms of astonishment, some looked around, expecting the Emperor's intervention through inf. If any had occurred, Angelica must have missed it. She could not tear her eyes away from the woman-fire.

She was not alone. Hundreds of guests, dozens of Enstahs, employees of the company hired to organize the event - all immersed in a strange stupor, stared as the terrible woman conquered the castle square in gazelle-like leaps, heading for - Angelica shifted her gaze - straight to Judas McPherson!

There were a dozen or so people on the giantess's path, but Angelica had no doubts. And she wasn't the only one who came to this conclusion. More than a dozen nanomatic manifestations of guests rushed to cross the path of the black sprinter. Because protocol was binding on them, in comparison to the woman they were slow and clumsy in their humanoid forms: they wouldn't run faster than a human could run, they wouldn't hit harder, they wouldn't survive what a human wouldn't.

The race didn't last more than a few seconds, very quickly it became obvious who had a chance to reach her and who didn't. There were four manifestations left capable of blocking her path.

Then something strange happened - Angelica blinked, for the first second not believing her eyes - because here was the woman-fire in mid-jump, without slowing down at all, she split into two.

A split second later she split into two again. Four living torches were already running towards the host.

After such a dilution of the nanomatic manifestation (because no one could have any doubts about the nature of the phenomenon), its individual copies would remain relatively weak for some time, because they were based on incomplete bonds. At the same time, however, the free multiplication proved that the running woman completely disregarded the protocol. If so, the nanomatics

limited by its prohibitions had no chance - so the four self-proclaimed heroes stopped, letting the fiery quartet pass. There is no such game in which an honest player will win against a cheater who ignores all the rules.

Angelica looked at her father. Despite the distance, she could see clearly.

He had seconds left. He was not running away. He was saying something to the mandarin. The mandarin showed the Emperor's remorse with his whole being: he fell to his knees, bowed his forehead to Judas.

Judas handed the waiter his glass, took off his glasses, and took a deep breath. Second he said something to his wife and Angelica saw her father's calm face over her mother's shoulder.

She managed to read the words from the sparing movements of his lips:

"A picturesque attack, I won't deny it, they tried."

Her throat tightened. She understood what he wanted to explain to her under the black sky of Africa. *We all fall in love with ourselves, after all.*

I hope you have archived the memory of those three days in Puermageze.

May it be short and painless.

The first of the women-fires ran up to Judas, grabbed him with both hands and tore him to shreds. The guests watched with interest. Meat and blood exploded in a wet crackling sound several meters in all directions. Angelica once saw two lionesses tearing an antelope apart. the Antelope was their food, so they were more hygienic in this.

The Mandarin exploded into a thin cloud of nanomatic suspension and in this form threw himself at the murderess. He embraced her in a high whirlwind of inf; they disappeared behind a curtain of dust.

The three remaining copies spun on their heels and rushed straight at Angelica.

Her heart froze.

Why me? Why me? Why? Half a year since archiving. Where does pain go when the spine is torn out at the beginning?

Run away. They will catch up.

Blood to the head, blood from the head, ice in the chest.

She sat down.

Zamoyski saw the girl slump onto the bench, almost fainting, very pale under her dark tan. He took the glass with the rest of the juice from her hand. She did not react. She stared ahead with wide brown eyes. He followed her gaze, but saw nothing unusual. The music had stopped, and for some reason most of the guests were looking toward the far end of the lawn. Had something happened? What was it? He looked around again, disoriented. Maybe he should catch up with someone from the wedding party and ask them? But none of them were walking along the tree line.

"Miss McPherson...? What?"

She waved him off angrily. She stood up and straightened up as if to stand at attention.

Adam frowned, trying to remember the sound of thunder. The sky was cloudless. Could she have been scared? But why had the music stopped?

The longer he listened, the more certain he was that there was music playing, rising louder and louder over the din of conversation. Is the sound system malfunctioning? But the speakers are on this side, and I should...

The girl screamed, Adam looked back at her and something hit him in the chest with great force. He flew behind the bench, hit the back of his head against the trunk of an oak tree. The air forced out of his lungs escaped through the constricted larynx, he heard that rasping whistle.

Images exploded above him in halos of red mist:

Angelica jumping onto the bench, reaching for something with both hands.

A stream of fire aimed straight at his face.

A black hand, a red eye.

The mist obscured everything.

He dreamed of space again. With the dream, weightlessness embraced him. It was almost as if he had physically broken free from the power of gravity - clouded vision, a hot head, the rush of blood. Artificially refreshed air in his lungs. He straightened his arm and grabbed something. He felt metal under his fingers and realized that he was not wearing a spacesuit. He pulled himself to the anchor point. Now his sight returned. Great darkness, a horizontal band of stars. A screen or a window; a screen, I think. The stars were moving to the left. He looked around the room and saw vague blurs of angular objects—armchairs? Desks? Suddenly shadows shot out from under them: the curvature of the planet was entering the screen. Before a sudden jerk pulled him back into the gravitational well, he had time to register the image of the globe's surface. It was not Earth—it was not one of the Sun's children.

"Mr. Zamoyski! Mr. Zamoyski...!"

He sat up and pulled away from the hand that was shaking him.

"Are you feeling all right?" asked Doctor Soyden.

Zamoyski nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Zamoyski, Adam. What time is it?"

"You've been unconscious for over nine hours."

"Damn it. What happened?"

"You fell and hit your head on a tree. A beautiful lump. You shouldn't have had to drink so much."

Zamoyski felt the back of his head. It really was a plum.

He was in his room in the west wing of the castle. He got up from the sofa and went to the window.

From here, from the high ground floor, he could see two-thirds of the lawn. The lanterns were already burning, constellations of balls of colored light pushing the evening twilight beyond the rectangular green area — the wedding was still

going on there. The music reached even through the closed windows. Dancing couples moved across the terrace in ragged trains of shadows.

The door creaked, Zamoyski turned around, it was Nina.

She entered, looked at Doctor Soyden, at Adam and breathed a sigh of relief.

“I was afraid that he would get a concussion or worse,” she said, approaching.

“The most we could do is read the bastard, it would be more useful,” the doctor muttered to Nina. “If it goes on like this, I’ll have to write him again. Tell Judas to finally take him out of his body and put him in my Słowiński Purgatory, after two hours I’ll give him a million frenzied Adam Zamoyskis and maybe we’ll find some phren more organized than a drunken clown. What? What? What do you mean...”

Nina approached Zamoyski - he moved away. She held out her hand - he pushed it away. He wasn’t looking at the woman, he was looking at Soyden.

“Doctor,” he began slowly, walking around the armchair on the opposite side, “Doctor, would you be so kind as to repeat what you just said?”

Doctor Soyden glanced at Nina.

“What’s going on?”

“Exactly, Nina,” Zamoyski smiled, “maybe you could explain to us what’s going on?”

Nina clearly didn’t like that smile.

“Come on, Adam, that’s all over now.”

Doctor Soyden watched Zamoyski approach in amazement bordering on fascination.

“Is he going to beat me?”

Nina sank into the leather armchair with a sigh, the black leather creaking loudly.

“That’s not out of the question.”

“He’s going to beat me!” Soyden shouted in a high-pitched voice, almost delighted.

Zamoyski lowered his gaze to his clenched fists. He wasn’t wearing a jacket, the cut of his white shirt couldn’t hide his broad shoulders and thick arms. Stooped, Adam looked even more like a bull leaning into a charge.

“Oh, yes. Oh, yes.” He moved his jaw, chewing these words like stones, they could almost hear them grinding between his teeth. “Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.”

Doctor Soyden wiped the sweat from his forehead with a theatrical gesture.

“Oh, the finger of God, something’s jammed in our golem.” He bowed to Nina. “You’d better scan yourself before Judas orders you to reset. I’m going to the knight’s to eat something, I can barely stand on my feet, since noon there’s been nothing but alarms, what a day, a Słowiński wouldn’t keep up...”

He left, still mumbling under his breath.

Zamoyski turned on his heel, took two long steps and stood over Nina.

She raised an eyebrow.

“Uh-oh.”

“Speak!”

She stuck out her tongue at him.

“I hit my head on the trunk” he began slowly. “Someone... something pushed me; I remember. What happened there? What about Angelica McPherson?”

“What was supposed to happen? Maybe you should lie down and get some sleep, huh?”

“I slept for nine hours!”

“Ha ha, if only!”

“What kind of games are these? Me again...”

“Again?” she smiled, mechanically twisting the ring on her finger. “Again?

What do you mean 'again'? Do you want to have some fun? What? Since you've already been torn apart — since we're both going to end up in the trash and I don't have to pat you on the head anymore, maybe a hammer is more effective — then tell me, who am I?"

"Nina..."

"Yes?"

"Nina..."

"So?"

"Nina..."

"I'm listening."

"Nina."

"Nina, Nina, Nina. What are our children's names? Son? Daughter? Do we even have children? No, I'm your child. Am I? I'm not? Would you like to fuck me?" She pinched her nipple through her dress, a smile never leaving her lips, innocent, passionate, mocking, compassionate, angry, whatever Zamoyski thought of her, it would be true.

"Nina, Jesus Christ, I..."

A wall, a white wall, a soft mattress — it hit, bounced, hit, bounced, there was nothing to attach an association to, it scratched the air, dug its teeth into the smoke, Nina, Nina, Nina, emptiness and chaos.

Who is she? I behave towards this woman as if she were someone I had been close to for years, every word refers to the memory of a thousand other words, every gesture or to the memory of a thousand other gestures. Old friends never really talk to each other, but to the accumulated memories of their previous conversations - who am I talking to now? Who is she? How did I meet her? Where did I meet her? Did I bring her to McPherson with me, did she come with the TranxPol delegation, or on her own? Where did she come from? She's not Polish, we speak English. That accent... American? I don't even know her nationality! Christ, anything, an image, a voice - the faintest memory of our past - is gone, gone, gone. The memory of Nina goes back only a few days. A

few days, the time of my visit to McPherson. “I’m sorry...”

Despair — she must have seen this despair — he reached out to her with an open hand, as if touch could bring to the surface of the mind what words could not. The woman waited for the touch with the passivity of a domestic animal, a flower, a piece of furniture. He shuddered, stepped back. She did not move. Was she breathing at all? Zamoyski doubted. The lump throbbed on the back of his head with a warm pain, I hit my head, such things happen...

She watched him with a face devoid of all expression, like the face of a doll — or a corpse.

He left the room.

He heard her get up and follow him. He forced himself not to look back.

A long corridor led from the west wing to the central gallery, wrapped in a horseshoe above the castle’s spacious main hall. The floor of the hall was slightly below ground level.

Zamoyski knew the layout of the ground floor rooms well. He knew that behind that door hidden under the gallery on the opposite side of the horseshoe, which opened with a sharp grating sound as soon as Adam left the corridor, the stairs leading to the Farstone cellars, closed to guests, began behind that door. The rest of the castle, apart from the east wing and the fourth floor, remained accessible to everyone, and Zamoyski managed to explore it quite thoroughly. It was a very beautiful castle, a monument filled with monuments, all in excellent condition. He was not surprised that Judas was so proud of it that he invited his business partners here. It certainly made an impression, exerted a subconscious pressure, those portraits of ancestors, incunabula in vacuum cabinets, medieval weapons above fireplaces as large as a cathedral portal. Candles were lit on high chandeliers for dinner. The servants wore livery in the McPherson family colors...

Judas McPherson appeared in the doorway to the cellar stairs. The billionaire entered the hall and looked towards the wide open wooden gate, from behind which colorful lights were shining into the depths of the shadowy hallway and waves of sounds were flowing, music, mixed human voices, laughter and shouting, the rustle of trees ruffled by the evening wind.

Having looked, Judas swore loudly. Having sworn, he jumped on one leg several times, touched his nose, knee, the other knee with a straightened finger, bit the finger, then did three quick somersaults, stopped in a kneeling position, balled his right hand into a fist and slammed it with a swing on the mosaic floor of the hall. Once, twice. He swore again, wincing in pain. He stood up, staggered. His left arm twitched in irregular convulsions.

Zamoyski watched this in silent amazement. Nina stood behind him, he could feel her warm breath on his neck.

Judas McPherson was going crazy in the hallway. Tailcoat, waistcoat, trousers - crumpled, dirty, already torn in two or three places, a long grey streak on his back... McPherson was still going crazy.

Now he was trying to walk on his hands.

Judas McPherson, thought Zamoyski. The president of a shipyard holding company, a tycoon in the arms industry... Adam remembered how McPherson had greeted him in Farstone right after Zamoyski had arrived from Warsaw, how he had greeted the entire TranxPol negotiation team led by Jaxa — a quick, strong handshake, a look in the eye. And now - a clown.

Exactly, what about them — with Pleciński, with Jaxa? It was nice of McPherson to invite us to his daughter's wedding, but it was high time we signed the contracts... The council would get on our backs if the Pakistani-Slovakian consortium was the first to file...

Judas walked back and forth across the lobby on his hands and knees, his legs bent at the knees as he bounced off the stone walls.

Three waiters walked through the lobby, none of them blinking. They passed the billionaire, skillfully balancing their trays.

"Come on, come on," Nina whispered. "Come on. You shouldn't catch their eye. We'll fall asleep in a moment. It's over in a moment. Come on, come on, calm down. Come on, Adam, we'll go back to the womb, everything will start over. You'll love me again. Or not. Again, sincerely and forever."

Outside, the warm night and soothing music flowed.

Adam shook his head angrily. Hunched, with the muscles of his shoulders and

neck tense, his hands clenched on the railing—he looked as if he was preparing to break that wooden railing with his bare hands. He blushed, his jaw moving rhythmically as he chewed the silence. A stony silence, the only defense against the madness that was quickly approaching.

The silhouette of a tall man appeared in the doorway from which McPherson had emerged. Leaning against the doorframe, he watched Judas.

Who, for a change, began to untie and tie the laces of his patent leather shoes, once, twice, three times, five times, faster and faster, changing feet and finally using only one hand.

Zamoyski clenched his hands tighter, his knuckles showing under the taut skin. The woman of his oblivion was tugging on his sleeve. The clinical surrealism of the situation sent shivers down his skin, raised the hairs on the back of his neck, chilled his spine. He was out of breath. Someone had driven the vacuum pump wires into Zamoyski's lungs from below, and now they were turning the machine on at full power.

A Scottish aristocrat of blood and money performing the rituals of a madman before his eyes, in an elegant tailcoat and with unwavering seriousness on his face - well, that was too much. Either this wasn't really happening, or...

"Mr. Adam, may I have a word?" Judas called out, breaking through a slight shortness of breath.

Zamoyski straightened up, let go of the railing. Nina moved away from him as quickly as possible, hiding in the shadows.

As he was already going down to the hall, he looked at her - only now - and caught her gaze, sad, a little tired.

Right under the gallery, next to the central stairs, there was a red and black bas-relief with the McPherson family coat of arms: the dragon on it was red, the stone black. Below, the family motto. *Unguibus et rostro*. With claws and beak.

Judas beat his chest with his fists, exhaled quickly several times. He took off his tailcoat and threw it to the tall man standing in the basement door. Zamoyski saw the other man's face, he knew him - it was one of the billionaire's assistants.

McPherson nodded to Zamoyski.

“Shall we go for a walk?” he asked casually.

Without waiting for an answer, he waved his arms wide, grabbed Adam by the right elbow and led him to the terrace.

They passed several couples dancing sleepily and turned towards the south-east corner; they stopped only at the stone balustrade.

The wedding square stretched out before them, full of vibrating shadows, illuminated by balls of woolly light, interrupted by the moving and motionless silhouettes of people and objects. The music flowed with the cool air, most strongly marked by the smell of the lake, which quickly gave off heat; however, they couldn’t see the lake from here.

Zamoyski took a deep breath and felt his body come alive, a shiver ran through his nerves, shaking off the rust. Even the cold stone of the balustrade under his fingertips - it was more stony, more cold. This is how the world becomes real, with jumps in the intensity of sensations.

McPherson didn’t let go of Adam. A look from a distance of twenty, thirty centimeters like a shot to the center of the forehead - those eyes, those slightly curved lips, a few deeper wrinkles, everything emphasized with a thick mascara of congealing darkness... this was undoubtedly Judas McPherson overwhelming him with his very presence again, before whom even Jaxa bowed with his gaze, expression and gesture.

Zamoyski had prepared questions, a dozen questions like a collection of sharpened knives, but now, but with Judas’ hand under his arm - complete helplessness.

Judas, on the other hand, was blasting the morning star through the head, bang, bang, bang.

“You see, Mr. Zamoyski, we were all lying to you. Unfortunately, we can’t do it any longer. You have a device in your head, a control network in your brain, and thanks to it we could filter the stimuli reaching you. But during this attack, there was, hmm, imagine it as a short circuit, the erasure of the machine’s programs. I’m simplifying, of course; these are words you will understand. What could I do now? I could order Soyden to try programs on you that brutally wipe

your memory, because you've already seen and heard too much; or I could write this body off altogether and read you again. In any case, it would cut off the current line of your identity, your phren, and I would prefer to avoid that. I received, hmm, imagine it as a prophecy with a high degree of credibility — and it convinces me that you have a certain role to play, a rather important one. You have much to gain. You will learn how much. In the meantime, I wanted to apologize to you. I acted according to my best judgment. I beg your forgiveness."

Saying all this — and he spoke in a deep voice, subdued to a half-whisper — Judas kept making short, quick movements: hands, head, shoulders, feet. A boxer's warm-up before a fight, the electronic quiver of a damaged machine. It distracted Zamoyski.

"Are you feeling all right, sir?" he asked.

McPherson let go of Zamoyski's arm, moved away a little.

"I just came in," he muttered. "It doesn't fit well."

"You've got your back dirty again."

"Yes? Damn it."

Adam looked over Judas' shoulder and saw the tall figure of the assistant in the main door of the castle. The assistant was holding Judas' tailcoat in his hand. Zamoyski nodded at him. McPherson looked around. As if on cue, a fair-haired woman in a low-cut dress (beautiful breasts, diamond necklace) approached him. Her face quivered in spasms of rage, her green eyes filled with tears. "Son of a bitch" she whispered and jabbed McPherson in the eye with her straightened finger.

The movement was so incredibly fast that Zamoyski only realized it when he saw Judas falling helplessly — he fell to his knees, at the woman's feet, the finger went in up to the knuckle, she was now jerking her hand like crazy, there was very little blood, almost none at all.

Zamoyski spun on his left heel and planted a heavy half-hook on her chin. He heard her teeth crack. She fell to the terrace next to Judas.

Adam, hissing through his wide-stretched lips, waved his paralyzed right

hand.

He looked up. The closest dancers were just near the center of the terrace and most likely did not even notice what had happened.

The secretary in the tailcoat had certainly seen everything.

He approached, swore melancholy. He had a closely trimmed beard and a similar mustache, dark red.

“Patrick Gheorg,” he extended his hand to Adam. “McPherson.”

Zamoyski shook it with his left hand over the bodies of the woman and Judas.

“I think you should call the police.”

Patrick Gheorg shifted his gaze to Adam’s left. It was colorfully dusty there. The dust solidified into a short Asian dressed in dazzling white robes.

“Well?” Patrick Gheorg snapped at him.

“The Emperor expresses his deepest regrets.” The Asian bowed, almost kneeling.

“The Emperor can expect a quick reformatting,” Patrick Gheorg drawled.

“The Emperor admits his mistake.”

“The Emperor deliberately failed to fulfill his duties.”

“The Emperor will hide Stahs Judas McPherson in his hand.”

“A little late.”

“The Emperor invites you to the House. It’s a waste of time.”

“The Emperor will guarantee that no one will cross the First Tradition. No osmosis, mediated by manifestations - that’s the narrowest and safest channel. Tighten protocol throughout Farstone. Apologize to the Słowińskis on your behalf.”

The Asian man bowed again, then exploded into a cloud of gray dust that

immediately dissipated in the evening air.

Zamoyski coughed demonstratively, waved his good hand.

“Okay. Now I’ll... Allow me.”

He walked a wide berth around the bodies lying on the terrace floor and Patrick Gheorg McPherson, standing above them in an absurd pose, with a tailcoat in his outstretched hand, and descended the wide stairs onto the lawn.

He grabbed two glasses from the tray of a passing waiter, one after another. One contained alcohol; the other contained water. He downed both. He set off with a provocative, confident step between the shadows and the lights. He wasn’t drunk. He was terrifyingly, unbelievably, indecently sober.

However, he was walking without any real destination. Finally, he reached the edge of the park and stopped there - because that was a boundary of some sort. Like an automaton that had encountered an obstacle that was not included in the program.

He remembered the bench and Angelica and her look just before he was hit in the chest. Something hit him - there was nothing-nobody there, yet the blow threw him like a doll, spun him over the bench, threw him against a tree. He remembered that. Angelica’s look, the light of her dark eyes, how she looked at him, in amazement, regret and irritation - when he should have seen fear and anger there...

Zamoyski stood in the fragrant darkness of ancient trees and watched. Hundreds of wedding guests, dozens of servants. He watched - and now he saw.

Not a single camera, not a single still camera.

No one talking on the phone.

No bodyguards, no, even the most discreet bodyguards.

There are no old people here, not a single person who could be said to have passed middle age; Time does not disfigure anyone.

They carry Judas and the murderess into the castle, not hiding it at all — will someone run up? will they shout? will they hide their faces? Where?

The bride walks under the terrace — she sees her father's corpse, but what does she do? She sighs, raises her eyes to the sky and moves on.

Zamoyski stood with his feet spread wide apart, massaging his thick neck with a heavy hand.

Get drunk. It won't help. Ask. But what about. Who. Jaxa, where Jaxa. Why isn't he at the wedding? He should be. He was supposed to be the one to trick McPherson, this contract is his baby, I'm just acting here as a representative addition. I also have to chase Łukasiewicz away, the president will wash our heads if...

My memory.

He leaned his back against the trunk. He also leaned his head, which lifted his gaze above the battlements of Farstone. The balloon was now just a rough lump of black against the dark purple of the sky. The sun had set and the shadows had lost their sense of direction. He was sure the sky was cloudless, but he couldn't see any stars. No, there was one—the balloon alternately covered and uncovered it—Venus, so not a star after all.

Watching her next eclipses, he felt around in his pockets for his phone. He also checked the lapels of his jacket, the cuffs, and the collar. Nowhere.

Footsteps. He didn't take his gaze off the sky.

"The decisions have already been made."

That voice — Nina's voice.

"Who are you?" he croaked.

She snuggled up to him. Fingers on his cheek, fingers on his lips, slowly, gently reading the Braille of his face.

"I've always loved you."

Then he gave in: he closed his eyes, lowered his head. He embraced Nina, with his aching right hand he searched for her collarbone, her neck, that's how he always read women's moods, from the pulsation of their blood, the tension of their muscles, the scent of their skin. He immersed himself in her hair, inhaled the air.

Her body gave off no scent.

“Do I have an electronic filter in my head?” he asked calmly.

“Not anymore.”

“You are not human.”

“I am not.”

“Why can’t I see the stars?”

(Still whispering into her hair).

“Because they are not there.”

“Why can’t I see the stars?”

“Shh.”

“Why can’t I see the stars?”

“We are on Earth, there is only one star here, the Sun.”

“But light, why doesn’t light come, from the Milky Way, from other galaxies!”

“There is no Milky Way here, there are no other galaxies.”

“Where is here?”

“In Sol-Port.”

“And him?” (Words on hot breath directly into her ear). “This Port?”

“You will find out everything, Stahs McPherson received a message from the Well, he will need you.”

“McPherson is dead. She dug into his brain.” He chuckled. “Her fingernails were exceptionally long.”

“Stahs Judas McPherson is alive. He has already issued the appropriate orders in your case. He is used to assassination, he has many bodies prepared.”

He listened, nodded.

“And you?”

“I have no body.”

“you always loved me, right?”

“Yes.”

“Who are you?”

“Exactly that.”

“You can’t be killed either.”

“No.”

He tightened his hand around her neck.

“I don’t want to see you again! Go!” He pushed her away. “Go! Never again!”

Without losing her balance, she turned and moved toward the castle. She didn’t look back. She didn’t miss a step. No disorientation in her movements.

She quickly disappeared among the guests.

It was true — he saw it — he saw it clearly now — she was not human.

ZAMOYSKI was sitting on the ground, still under the same tree, when the man who had been chatting him up about juggling and his astronaut career before noon approached him.

Meanwhile, Zamoyski had managed to reach two conclusions, both equally irresistible to him. The first was that something was wrong with his head; the second was that somewhere between Warsaw and Scotland, somewhere over the North Sea, Zamoyski had entered the middle of a science fiction film.

It was obvious that he was weakening mentally, holes gaped in his memory like bomb craters, Nina for example, like a real Hiroshima.

He was also undoubtedly surrounded by ingenious F/X machinery hidden

beneath the surface of the world. Bang! A humble Asian man from nothingness into nothingness. Bang! bang! bang! He had seen it with his own eyes, it was as real as a toothache, a kick in the ankle, he had no thought of doubting his senses; it was not his senses that were failing.

An elegant blond emerged from the crowded semi-darkness, pulling Zamoyski out of his depressive spiral.

"Phoebe Maximillian de la Roche," she introduced themself and sat down next to him. Even as she sat on the ground between the rough roots of an elm tree, she maintained an aura of distinguished haughtiness. "You must be wondering about the reason for the assassination attempt."

"Well," Zamoyski muttered, "it failed anyway; McPherson is supposedly alive. Do you happen to have a phone with you?"

He didn't look back at De la Roche. An outside observer could easily have mistaken them for old friends, they sat shoulder to shoulder and lazily watched the wedding guests drift by in the shallow shadows.

"I was talking about the assassination attempt on you," Maximillian pointed out. "I would like to offer you legal and political assistance, both my own and the Horizontalists'. No strings attached. We would be very... Stahs."

Somehow he managed to bow to Angelica without getting up.

She approached them from the side, from behind a tree trunk, Adam first heard the rustle of her dress, then smelled her perfume (jasmine).

Angelica threw a cold look at De la Roche. She smiled warmly at Adam, on the other hand.

Without a word and without a moment's hesitation, she leaned down, grabbed his hand and with a vigorous jerk lifted him upright. He instinctively took part in the pantomime, simulated the inertia of his body, scraped the bark with his back.

He had no idea why he had so easily given in to the mood imposed by the girl. They were both smiling now, he — with a crooked, ironic smile from under his mustache.

She let go of Adam's hand. Leaning over De la Roche in turn, she kicked him lightly in the calf,

"Forgive me, Phoebe. Mr. Zamoyski is a close friend of mine. We must discuss some urgent matters."

De la Roche rose, bowed a second time, and left without a word.

"Really?" Adam muttered, winking at Angelica. "I am your close friend? It is good to know. And what are these matters?"

She tugged on his elbow. They are family affairs, he thought, "with the McPhersons."

"You will spend a long time with me now," she said, leading him into the depths of the park; the trees grew thick here, the lights and music were already fading behind them. "We shall get to know each other very well."

"Mhm, I hope the pleasure will not be all mine, but where exactly would I be?"

"With me. In Africa."

Puermageze

ABSOLUTE TIME (ULTIMATE TIME)

A consequence of the Kraft generalization of the Theory of Relativity is the so-called "a-time."

Since the Słowiński Time does not depend on the observer's position in the En-Port, nor on its velocity, and the Trans Time is constant, it is possible to establish an absolute difference in the rate of passage of time on the Plateau (in a Słowiński inclusion) and in any other inclusion. This standard measure is called "a-time."

However, the complete separability of any two Inclusions makes it impossible to reduce them to a single equation for any supra-Planck time interval. A-velocities do not describe the velocity of the system relative to the Plateau (Słowiński Inclusion) in any sense.

> ↳ Also used are: "Port-time" (time of a given Port), "k-time" (time of the cosmos, in the units of which Absolute Time is traditionally described).

"Multithesaurus" (HS subcode)

It was raining heavily in Puermageze when the Gnosis Inc. plane, carrying Angelica McPherson and Adam Zamoyski, landed at the monastery's Atlantic airport.

The rain was almost horizontal; Angelica had barely stepped into the jet's doorway when she was hit in the eyes with a wet broom. Before leaving Farstone, she had changed into clothes that were more comfortable for traveling: jeans, high-laced shoes, a black turtleneck. She felt best in that. Father Frenete's school had burned an organic aversion to all superfluous luxuries in her. Now, despite the leather jacket she was still wearing, the bone-breaking cold of the African night shook her.

Home, she thought as she walked down to the jeep, home. On the hill, above the palm grove that surrounded the airport's single runway from the east, the black mass of the Puermageze monastery towered in square terraces. She could tell who was asleep and who wasn't by the configuration of the lights on the high surfaces of its walls.

Goates waved at her from behind the wheel. She shouted at Zamoyski and ran down to the jeep. The black man, seeing Adam, bared his crooked teeth at Angelica. She cursed him in his dialect.

They had barely set off when Zamoyski began making ironic remarks from the back seat about the completely incomprehensible technical sophistication of the rickety off-roader.

He was still furious with Angelica. He realized that the feeling was irrational - but that wasn't enough to control him.

Their conversation on the plane... He wouldn't forget a single word - just as cattle are marked with a burning iron, so she had burned the mark of subjection into his head, he was no different from cattle for slaughter.

"You were resurrected from remains found in the wreck of the *Wolszczan* by my father's trident" she began. "Add six hundred years."

"How many?"

"Six hundred... and change"

"So now we are. . . "

"In the twenty-ninth century. 2865 AD, 521 PAT."

"Excuse me...?"

"Plateau Absolute Time is counted from the moment humans dekrafted the first Plateau. After converting to k-years, this gives the year five hundred and twenty-one, although PAT is clocked in a-plancks and. . . "

"I understand, I understand, I understand."

He looked out the window at the dark sea, over which the plane was laboriously rising from the coast of Scotland. Adam turned his head so that Angelica could not see the expression on his face. He had no idea what emotions were reflected on his face; he suspected the worst.

Of course, he was tempted to play the cynical unbeliever—to burst out laughing, to mock, to grimace ironically; these are the defense mechanisms of a healthy mind. But he believed Angelica, he believed her quite organically, with a shiver on his skin, a stomach cramp, a fever in his mouth.

He looked at the dark sky.

"Why can't you see the stars?"

"Ah, yes. Hmm. I don't know much about Kraft, and you've had some courses in the exact sciences, I think..."

She picked up a cotton napkin from the table, waved it in front of Zamoyski's nose; he had to look away from the window.

"A two-dimensional simplification of space-time."

"This napkin."

"Yes. Now" she rolled the material into an empty tube "we bend it 'inward'. From the moment it closes — it doesn't exist for the outside as a place. Two separate systems. It doesn't even have boundaries, however you count it, from the inside or the outside. The starlight has nowhere to get inside, it continues along its gravitational trajectories, bypassing the Port that was created in this way. Similarly, the light of the Sun will not escape from it: there is no window,

no outlet, no connection with the outside. Unless we deliberately open the Port."

He glanced again into the darkness.

"So why is it night at all?"

"Hmm?"

"If the sun's rays can't leave — they can't penetrate the napkin..."

"Eventually we would cook, yes. But that would probably take millions of years... If you beat me up on such details, I'd better admit it right away. I know there is an internal outlet for energy, the Fangs drain it through kraftholes, replenishing their reserves."

"Fangs?"

"They usually have the shape of cones, that's the standard: one hundred and twenty meters in diameter at the base, four hundred in length. Basic Krafting tools. It takes three to wrap and hold the Port; the Fangs remain 'outside', only the space between them "shrinks". Sol-Port is maintained by several thousand Fangs. Twenty or thirty would probably be enough, but that's for a sense of security, you know."

He pressed his temple against the cold metal. They entered the cruising route, the plane was on an even course. Were they really flying south? No lights in the sky, no lights on the ground, at sea. They were hanging in darkness.

"I assume that this Sol-Port encompasses the entire Solar System."

"Yes. Along with the Oort Cloud, all the junk."

"And where are we really now?"

"If I remember correctly, we're going through the core of the Milky Way towards the Second Arm."

"Fast?"

"Because I know. Traveler."

"Why at all?"

“For security.”

He finally looked her in the eye. She wasn’t smiling, and that gave him courage.

He looked around the interior of the spacious cabin.

“Carpets. Armchairs. Wooden furniture” he pointed out each one with an outstretched hand. “Glasses... glass. A monitor here, LCD, technology that is outdated even for me. Light bulbs. Oh, and there is a telephone. Although I haven’t seen it in Farstone. But Farstone too... Is this some kind of open-air museum? Are these filters in my brain still working? Why do I see the twenty-first century everywhere here?”

For emphasis, he patted the back of his armchair, as if only touch could prove the reality of the surroundings.

Angelica shrugged.

“We are on Earth, what did you expect?”

“Progress. Progress in every detail. Maybe it’s a false memory, but this English — this is the classic English of my youth!”

“So what?”

“Six centuries is an abyss!”

“Because it is an abyss. However, certain conventions apply. We live in Civilization.” She sighed. “I’ll tell you. What do you want to know?”

“Why did you take me away from the wedding? So suddenly. As if I was in danger. Those assassination attempts... De la Roche said he was after me too. Is that why? To hide? Someone wants to kill me? Who? Why?”

“De la Roche...” Angelica asked. ”What else did they say?”

“She offered me legal help.”

“That’s interesting.” Angelica puffed out her cheek, stared at the ceiling. “Phoebe Maximillian won’t miss an opportunity. In one way or another, I was behind at least one of those murders, I would have given my hand.”

Murders. Zamoyski grimaced, leaned forward, and began to crack his knuckles loudly.

"What does that even mean," he mumbled "these phrases, polite I guess, Phoebe, Stahs, Osca, I've been hearing them for hours, artificial interjections in otherwise normal language..."

"How did it go, wait, because it was established ages ago... Oh! Post-Human Being, Standard Homo Sapiens and Out-of-Space Computer."

"She's a post-human being, and you're that standard Homo sapiens."

She patted him kindly on the hands, knuckles clasped together to the point of pain.

"Don't worry so much, you might even get citizenship eventually."

It took him a moment to understand. He raised an angry gaze at Angelica. She smiled comfortingly. If he had clenched his fists any harder, the skin on them would have cracked.

That was how Adam Zamoyski had learned that he was an object, the property of the McPhersons. He was owned.

EVAN rage is tiring. Before they left Puermageze Airport, he fell into a gloomy silence. The old black man squinted at him in the rear-view mirror, still grinning. Water was lashing the hard ground in long lashes around the car.

They drove into the monastery courtyard, Zamoyski looked out the window and saw a large stone well. He looked up. Rain was falling from the clouds straight at him, as if from the mouth of a giant blunderbuss, accelerated by spirals of moving shadow.

Angelica ran to the door in the windowless wall. He got out and followed her. As he entered the dry interior, he heard the jeep driving away, the car wheezed, skidding.

Even inside, the walls were cold, dark from centuries of darkness, accumulating on the bare stones with oily dew.

Angelica set a marching pace, Zamoyski didn't even think of asking anything, he would have to raise his voice from behind her; he wouldn't open his mouth.

The monastery, although looming on the horizon as a monumental mass from the airport, was in fact designed with great respect for space: the corridors they walked through were just wide enough for two people to pass each other freely, and not an inch wider. Zamoyski didn't see any large halls, spacious hallways, monstrous staircases. No decorations, no luxurious furnishings: stone, stone, stone, and rarely wood. The lighting was on the verge of semidarkness; bulbs bleeding yellow, hidden in the folds of the ceiling. Cables, thin and covered in faded insulation, crawled through the cracks between the stones, fastened on iron hooks.

Once they met a man with Mongoloid features in a dirty sweater, overalls, and sandals. Angelica exchanged a few sentences with him in Latin. He nodded to Adam. Then he went his way without looking back.

They were still walking deep into the bowels of the building, and Zamoyski, cut off from the damp night by windowless granite surfaces, began to lose his bearings. How many stories had they climbed? How many times had they turned, how many hundreds of meters had they covered?

Suddenly Angelica stopped, opened the door on the left, and with a courtly half-bow pointed to the open darkness:

"Your cell."

He pretended to look in.

"Get some sleep," McPherson advised. "We'll talk again tomorrow."

He dug his hands into his pockets.

"Am I prisoner?"

"What do you mean?"

"Am I prisoner or not...!"

With a tired movement, she brushed her black hair back from her forehead. The gesture charmed Zamoyski, but he stifled the feeling.

With a sigh, Angelica swung on the half-open door. It creaked, echoing throughout the monastery.

“A prisoner?” She yawned. “Have you been imprisoned? In what prison? In a monastery? No. In Puermageze? And where will you go from here? In Sol-Port? You are definitely not rich enough to leave it. In the galaxy, in the universe? To the same extent as everyone else. In your body, in your mind? If you can, if you want to. But is it really necessary tonight? Go to sleep.”

She remembered his look as she undressed for the bath. Humiliation, he feels humiliated. It was sad. I must be the embodiment of fate’s cruelty to him now. She immersed herself in the boiling water. She had no choice after all. Could she refuse her father? In theory, yes. In practice, however... She could not imagine any other behavior at that time. He had just emerged from the tank and was being wiped with thick towels. The Farstone catacombs were located three floors underground; the basement storage rooms for the hollows were well guarded. Angelica was brought there by the primus of one of the unliberated Phoebes of Gnosis, Arcana Mettilu.

He was standing behind her then, by the door of the brightly lit hall - in front of her, the new body of Judas McPherson was shaking in the hands of the multi-manifest medical program.

“What is the interval of your archiving?” she asked dryly, folding her arms across her chest.

”Quadrangle. I have a one-way init–ppp... connection” Judas groaned. ”Bar, ra, har, ara, llel, parallel attack went on... on Fieeeld architec-tec-ture.”

“Who?”

”I don’t believe... Blind algorithms. Bababababababababacked up on dark Fieelds. Transsssssss off-plateau.”

”It must have had some trigger, a price program, must have been set to a sign. You don’t believe in random synchronization, do you?”

“Of course. B-a-b-but...”

“It ate its own tail. Yes. That woman?”

“Possessed, dana, jana, kana.”

“Scan?”

“Arcana will tell you. I’m babbling so-so-so fffar for now. You hear me.”

He broke away from the medicus’s manifestations, began to jump, waving his arms. He also fell silent for a moment, only moving his jaw, rolling his tongue, breathing deeply. He fell over twice, his limbs hitting the floor with wet sand. He resembled a frog with electrodes attached to his muscles.

Angelica felt fleetingly proud that such an association had occurred to her.

Then, sitting on the floor, he spoke to his daughter much more clearly. She approached him, crouched down next to him. She looked very closely. She saw how he was struggling, trying to control a body with a brain into which he had just been imprinted. He turned clumsily, helping himself with his elbow - a fish washed ashore, striking the ground with its fin.

Angelica began to massage the muscles of his back. His skin was hot, moist, sticky. He spoke more quietly now; protocol was in force and the medicus’s manifestations and Metillu could not hear him.

“We caught news of the war from our Well” he fought with his larynx and tongue, gradually forcing them into obedience. ”Dated plus seventy-two-ten. The reason given was this Zamoyski. A few hundred bits, no specifics. The Emperor claims that the first attack on him was serious, that is — on Zamoyski. It succeeded only on Plateau. So the phren was preserved in the body, but all the attachments in his brain — are reset. Now the point is to. . . ”

The door of the second chamber opened and a shaking Moetle rolled into the room, also naked and wet. Doctor Soyden, together with the medicus, tried to stop him, but Moetle was thrown in all directions as if in a chorea attack.

“H-how...?” he moaned. “H-how did this hap-pen...?”

“No co-contact” Judas replied.

Moetle clutched his head.

"Jesus Christ! Probably a bunch of Phre-rens still...!"

"Yes. If you find yourself."

"Kukukukukukuku-wa."

"I couldn't have said it better myself."

Angelica had never met Moetle before. Although he was a few steps down the family tree, he was several decades older than she. Given the predominance of genes from outside the clan, there wasn't much of the McPherson phenotype left in him.

He looked at Angelica for a long time — from under eyelids fluttering like hummingbird wings — but he probably didn't recognize her, not having access to Plateau. She knew Moetle didn't follow the First Tradition.

The energy finally drained completely from the freshly resurrected man, and he leaned against the nearest protein vat. There Soyden caught up with him—slapped him, caught his eyelids with his fingers, peered into his eyes, punched him in the sternum, once, twice. Moetle wheezed, coughed, and spat a lump of thick phlegm onto the floor.

Mettillu brought Judas his clothes. By the time Judas had buttoned his waistcoat and put on his tailcoat, Moetle had recovered enough to control his post-implementation fever of emotions and to gain some control over his more complicated bodily functions.

"How long?" he asked. "How long?"

"Almost three months," Soyden told him.

"Oh God...!"

"Beatrice's getting married. The wedding's upstairs."

"And Ju-judas...? Why?"

"Traditionally," Judas said, trying to move freely in his clothes. "Do you remember where you wanted to fly?"

"Where?"

”You took a trident without specifying the destination. Leasing on a personal guarantee.”

Moetle shook his head.

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe we’ll get out of Purgatory.”

Judas took his daughter by the arm and led her behind the tank, where one of Angelica’s mother’s hollows was slowly turning in turbid liquid. Angelica stared at it. Judas wanted to push her, but his hand didn’t obey him, he pulled, and they fell against each other. Angelica stepped back, reflexively smoothing the front of his shirt.

“I won’t drain Zamoyski,” he said, adjusting his collar. “The prophecy is suspended on terms we don’t know - maybe the information I would get from draining his phren would set everything in motion. You’ll take him to Puermageze, let him float to the surface on his own. Nothing more.”

“To Puermageze?”

“Yes.”

“In the face of war?”

“There’s no point in going to war anyway, no point in going to war, I can’t help it, and by removing him from view, I’m reducing the chance of the future signaled by the Well coming true. Who wants war? No one wants war. Let’s let this die down, let’s not add fuel to the fire.”

“The Emperor gave guarantees?”

“Think about it, Angelica.”

She looked at her father questioningly. He just raised an eyebrow. Some things were all too obvious.

The FTIP protocol was in effect. They protected themselves from the Emperor’s direct and indirect interference by censoring information to the extent possible. The Emperor was unable to hear their conversation. Angelica could bet that he hadn’t heard about the latest prophecy from the Gnosis Well either.

Therefore, he had no reason to give Zamoyski a guarantee. Asking for it would go exactly along the lines of prophecy, because it would put Zamoyski on the stage and make him an important element of political games. If Judas wanted to avoid war—and he did, he certainly did, Angelica believed his words, she couldn't imagine why he would want to destroy Civilization—the only thing left for him was to remove Zamoyski from the scene, to push him off the front lines. Is there a more distant province in Sol-Port than Puermageze? It's certainly hard to find one on Earth.

"Should I watch over him?" she asked.

"You're supposed to keep him in the shadows. Away from Plateau."

"What do the Inclusions say?"

Gnosis had sixty closed Inclusions, a dozen or so open ones, had shares in hundreds more, and used the services of most of the liberated (they worked mainly as translators, building various Subcodes). The total number of Inclusions created by the McPherson corporation was already over ten thousand; logical semi-inclusions were counted in the hundreds of thousands.

"They weigh the probabilities" Judas replied. "Cross-predictions from other Wells."

"Who do they attribute the attacks to?"

"There are ambiguities here" he admitted, and suddenly sneezed loudly. He took out a handkerchief, dropped it, picked it up, dropped it, picked it up, blew his nose (more white goo flowed from his nostrils) and cursed with melancholy."

From the other end of the chamber came a cry:

"Cheers!"

Judas turned and looked at Moetle through the thick suspension filling the tank with Anna McPherson. Moetle was currently practicing walking, sitting, and standing with Dr. Soyden's help; he was still shaking like an epileptic. The medicus's manifestations watched his every move.

Judas, whose spent bioware manifestations were counted in the hundreds, had more experience and knowledge in this field than the doctor's. After all,

that was his third body that day.

“As for Moetle,” he said slowly, lowering his voice even more, “there’s no certainty that it was really an attack. There’s no certainty that he really died. He might have to synthesize two phrenes; that’s never pleasant. But...” He looked back at his daughter and shrugged.

“Kidnapping for memory?”

“The Inclusions thought about that too,” McPherson admitted. “But Moetle is too low in the decision-making hierarchy, the gain is too small in relation to the risk. What could they possibly get out of his head? In fact, no one knows where he went with that trident.”

Judas reached up with a trembling hand and brushed back the hair that was falling over Angelica’s face.

“But when it comes to murdering me... The Inclusions vote for at least two independent attempts. Both total. The first more dime-worthy, this nanomancy, which apparently broke the protocol, and the Plateau flood, yes, that was very un-heavenly, they almost managed to reach the Fields with my archives. The Inclusions have no idea how it is even possible. Unless that mythical Suzerain... The Emperor sprinkles his head with ashes.

“Well, yes. You’re getting a lot out of it now. . . ”

“These are very useful debts of gratitude, Angelica, do not underestimate the Emperor’s word. Why are the long-lived so powerful? Because they had time to make almost everyone dependent on them. Death cuts these networks of contacts, favors, influences, they cannot be inherited, so they do not grow beyond a certain scale - but if you do not die, the network grows infinitely. Have you noticed that the first is-is–is of the elderly is irritation with everything new, that comes from outside the world they know? It does not belong to the network - so it is a threat. We...”

“Yes?” Angelica moved closer, it was almost a whisper. Father shook his head.

“The second attempt” he muttered, tilting his head, until something popped in the neck, “it was a classic viral attack, although extremely virulent, they probably knew the external codes, the crypto finitic cracked too quickly. Fortu-

nately, it turned out to be poorly aimed: after this first attempt we redirected my archives."

"So many of them that they knock the daggers out each other's hand, the poison drips onto the floor" Angelica muttered.

"Something like that." Father winked at her (his eyelid jammed and he fell into a mimic tic for a dozen or so seconds). "The most obvious candidate is the Horizontalists, but we need two candidates here. Who's the second? If we find a second suspect, then the first one also becomes doubtful."

Angelica twirled her hair around her fingers thoughtfully.

"De la Roche probably expected..."

"They're a Phoebe without Tradition, you wouldn't know anything from their behavior."

"Maybe that's what they were aiming for..."

"Maybe."

"Of course, they breed us in their Fields, they know how to play us."

"Or they think they do..."

That's exactly what the trap her father had caught her in looked like, a velvet trap of trust. Another moment of such dialogue and she could not imagine refusing his request in any form.

She left the castle, said goodbye to her mother, found Zamoyski and dragged him to the airport; at first a playful flirtation was enough, in the end she had to drag him almost by force. The luggage was already waiting on the plane. "Time, time, we'll tease each other later," she urged the resurrected man. Adam showed irritation and indignation with visible effort; he desperately tried to play the part of a normal person and produced hundreds of trick questions to Angelica's torment. However, the truth had long been leaking to him through the subconscious osmosis of the unnamable. He shouted, but did not resist - there was no point in resistance; this truth also reached him without the mediation of words. He boarded the plane, sat down, fastened his seat belt. She could tell by the way he crossed his legs: he did not want to make a fool of himself in her

eyes. He kept asking, though, and finally she told him, “From what I understand, you were revived from the remains found in the wreck of the *Wolszczan* by my father’s trident. Add six hundred years to that.”

She almost fell asleep in the bath. But the water quickly gave off its warmth and Angelica woke up with a shiver. She dried herself and combed her hair.

The storm had ended (Africa is a man, his anger and pleasure never last long) and McPherson opened the window to the cool dampness of the night. The night was dark, moonless, but Angelica only had to close her eyelids to see the same landscape that had burned day after day into her brain in frescoes of reflected heat for all those years, half dry coastal wasteland, half silver-shining ocean depths.

During the first nights spent in that cell, Angelica (but what Angelica? - not this one, but a different one, a five-year-old puppy) was afraid to look out the window; and before dusk, during the day, too. That endless wasteland terrified her, two infinities of two elements, and when she finally looked, she couldn’t tear her eyes away - then she dreamed of waking up alone, in an absolutely silent wilderness, where even silence was a scream, more desperate than a scream. Arthur, Mue’s son, seven years older than Angelica, took her on walks around the monastery and village of Puermageze with Father Frenete’s permission. Gradually, the walks extended to several-day, several-day expeditions into the depths of black Africa. This lasted until Mue’s family was expelled from Civilization; Arthur flew away from Puermageze. Angelica walked alone. Sometimes one of the Jesuits joined. For example, Father Mervaux was a passionate hunter, he showed her the scars left by the lion’s claws, he swore they were original. They would approach elephants together. When she first saw the death of an elephant, her throat tightened. This animal died like a god. Here, the hunter commits the greatest sacrilege possible. The old female was standing on a hillock, raising her trunk to catch scents she had already sensed. Mervaux’s bullet had shattered the elephant’s thick forehead bone and devastated her brain. The female didn’t even have time to roar. She stood there for a moment longer—a monumental stillness—then she began to fall. She fell, fell, fell—Angelica’s heart almost broke—she kept falling. They felt the earth shake as the elephant finally crashed into the grass. The majesty of this animal is too great; the majesty of its death reaches the registers reserved for mystical experiences. She confided in Father

Mervaux. “Sometimes I just have to look out the window and I see them standing there, above the beach, males, females, young. You shouldn’t have killed her.” Father Mervaux said something terrible to her in response: “A hunter’s heart, angel. You will go and track them down.” She would sooner cut off her own hand! Besides, she had no time for more expeditions anyway. Father Japre, a linguist, began his metalinguistic course with her. In Puermageze, the lessons proceeded in a precise rhythm, in thematic sequences. She spent her days and nights consolidating grammatical mnemoschemes, deriving entire dictionaries from given processes of the Subcode. But her dreams, her dreams, were wordless. She saw a herd. The male guide turned his large tusks, dark yellow with plant juices, towards her. Until one morning Father Frenete visited her and said that in view of her visible and unceasing absent-mindedness, Father Japre was suspending further lessons. Father Frenete knew about elephants. He blessed her and said goodbye. There was no compulsion in this, only permission to fulfill the duties of her age. In two weeks she would be fifteen. She packed her rucksack, slung her heavy Abmera (a gift from Father Mervaux) over her shoulder, and left Puermageze. No one would go with her, and no one would follow her if she didn’t come back herself, she knew perfectly well that was one of the things parents of children sent here paid the order for—the right to take risks. She wanted to take Goates with her, after all, who had taught her the hieroglyphic writing of the earth. But he had only shaken his head. So she had gone alone. There were many mounts in the Puermageze stables, not geniuses, but still very hardy and intelligent, immune to the continental plagues; yet she had set off on foot, that’s how all hunters went. I am not a hunter, I am not a hunter, she told herself, I will not kill an elephant. The Abmera was a hand-made, macro-material rifle, firing hard-shell .540 caliber recoilless ammunition; in traditional rifles of this type, the stock would dig the shoulder out of the joint with each shot. Angelica knew the elephant migration routes; herds, large and small, had traversed Africa over the last centuries on the same paths; they had their mud pools, their grazing groves, their deserts and dying swamps. She walked east, towards the sun—in sultry afternoons, in frosty nights, when frost silvered the blades of grass. Waking up by the dying fire, she saw the incredibly bright eyes of hyenas, sneaking up to eat excrement buried too deeply. She shot three when they came too close, the Abmera’s bullets piercing them like an invisible, fist-thick spear. She walked, and during the entire journey she saw no human being. As far as she could see from under her wide-brimmed hat, she was the only human being here as far if she had soared for miles in the air. She realized that she hadn’t said a word for over a week. After all the exercises with Father Japre, she was

so surprised by the naturalness of her complete unfamiliarity to speech that she couldn't help herself and spoke to the honeyguide that was attacking her; her own voice sounded unfamiliar to her. Who was talking? The bird was listening too, tilting its head. Silence was dangerous. As she walked, she mumbled under her breath, "Where are they, where did they go...?" "Her food was running out. She had shot an antelope, a plump calf, the best meat; she was covered in blood. "I'm a hunter, of course I am..." She washed herself in the stream, and when she came out of it, she saw on the opposite bank plate-shaped depressions in the dry earth. Goates would have guessed it would take three or four days. After packing up the best cuts of smoked meat, she set off in the tracks of the herd. There were about fifty of them, nearly a dozen young. She was already heading north, the darkness rolling in to her left, where she belonged. The elephants were moving at a futile pace—if they had been on a long march, she would never have caught up with them; they could run for days. But luck was on her side. Luck, fate, God, the devil—in any case, she reached them at the crimson dawn, standing in the bend of a marshy river. First she heard the crackling of trees as they scraped against each other in the pre-sunlight, cracklings as loud as mortar explosions. She threw off her pack, unslung her Abmera, and walked into the wind. The crimson of sudden dawn was against her now, the silhouettes of elephants moved against the starry canvas of night like paper demons in a Japanese shadow play. In the great silence, the loud snorts and farts of the animals reached Angelica, and their smell, they were so close, she cocked the gun. Her hand moved on its own across the wood and pressed the cold metal, death perched on Angelica's right shoulder, the rifle jumped to her eye, she looked through the scope, and she saw that male, how he turned his big, yellow tusks towards her, his small eyes looked calmly, his drooping ears moved slowly, he was huge, he was powerful, menacing even in his sleepy laziness, he was beautiful. She had to breathe through her open mouth, with her full chest, such a great hunger for oxygen squeezed her, she felt such elation, a pain in her substernal chest. She looked at the male and knew that she was no longer able to remove her finger from the trigger, to lower her cold ambly, time ran in a parabola, the moment required closure, a thrown stone always fell. Wham! The shot was masterful, the elephant fell helplessly on its side, as if the earth had turned under its feet. Angelica reloaded. Other animals gathered around the dead animal, roars rang out. She fired a second time, into the air. The herd panicked, rushed through the muddy trough straight into the tunnel of bloody light opening in the rising Sun above the distant horizon. The earth shook under her feet as she approached the slaughtered male – whether from the herded flight of terrified

animals or from the galloping of her own heart. The male lay on his side and was still taller than her, that was how she perceived him. She stopped five or six meters from the elephant's head; she was afraid to get any closer. She knew he was dead, and yet she was afraid that when she approached him, he would wave his trunk, move his head, kick his leg one last time, and break her spine, rip out her insides, crush her. She was convinced of that, and yet she approached, touched him, rested her boot on his huge belly. She was alive. She had killed an elephant, and that was her elephant, dead. She had struck down a majesty. She now secured and threw off her hat ambly, slipped off her boots and socks, freed herself from her jacket, shirt, shorts. Naked, she stood over the elephant. With both hands, she began to scoop mud from the animal's hard, rough skin and put it on herself in handfuls. Meanwhile, the sun climbed the blue and the scene suddenly exploded with color. A moment ago, Angelica was still shivering from the cold—now a warm crust of clay was drying on her. She lit a fire. She went back for her backpack; she took out her machete and cut off the elephant's trunk. She roasted it and ate it. It was exactly as tasty as Angelica remembered. She vomited. She went for water. In one of the clearer pools by the river she saw her reflection. It shocked her all the more because it was so blurry. Only the whites of her eyes flashed brightly. She could not recognize herself in herself. She looked and looked, because it was an important image, she felt that she had to remember it, that it would define her for years, for centuries, for eternity; she convinced herself of this and believed it, and so it was already true. "Me. Me. Me. Yes." She took a sip of water, the image disappeared. From then on, however, she saw it whenever she looked in the mirror, and she smiled to herself secretly, because in those mirrors there were clean clothes, smooth skin, shiny hair, while she remembered the rough blackness of animal mud. She no longer dreamed of elephants, she was no longer afraid of the deserts outside the windows, she had probably even stopped missing her parents, Farstone. Only one doubt remained, now even more intensified by what Judas had said during his visit to Puermageze – did he know about it, did he plan it, did he pay the order for it too...? The Elephants.

That was what she dreamed about now – about him, about her father, about the death and resurrection of Judas McPherson.

A floor below, a few cells away, Adam Zamoyski also dreamed of resurrection—his own and someone else's. He dreamed and was not sure whether

it was a memory or a dreamlike imagination. Was he remembering the truth or a lie?

He remembered perfectly in his dream, on the seventh day, they saw the city towers.

On the seventh day, they saw the city towers, and it stretched across the red plain in a long oval of low buildings, the River of Blood cut it into two perfectly equal halves. The Planet Crusher hung in the evening sky, a chaotic constellation of pseudo-stars, illuminating the deserted metropolis with a cold light. The sun's spindle, Hakata, was not visible. It was an endless evening, the inertials in the globe's core were working at full power, leveling its rotational motion, gravity was slightly greater. The com-core had been turned on almost three hundred hours ago, and the atmosphere had already churned into one great, unceasing storm, and tens of thousands of underwater and surface volcanoes had spewed millions of tons of dirty lava and ash into the sky.

The earth shook beneath their feet as they descended toward the city.

"Narva," said the Resurrected Man. "Narva, Narva."

The city was called Narva, the planet was called Narva, the gods were called Narva, Narva was a curse and a cry of joy, Narva was their thoughts.

MultiEdward flashed in three people, jumped on the wave to the side, under the wave up, he had wings and he had no wings, he sang and was silent. Gathering himself together, he knelt down and bowed to the city, striking the earth four times with his forehead until it left a mark on the skin above his nose, a thick, black line, a sign of sacred anointing. Again he lost his resolve, splitting into two options, one turned on his heel and ran back, screaming with terror - the other took out the 2.01 Sword and checked it on his forearm: a streak of blood as the skin disappeared.

Zamoyski walked, the spirits of the dead suggesting the way...

"Mr. Zamoyski!"

She came in while he was sleeping, and now she stood between the bed and the window, an irregular patch of shadow against the dense clouds of light - that was all the half-awake Adam could see.

”What now?” he croaked.

He squinted, trying to see her face. The machine of associations was slowly accelerating in his head. A woman’s voice—Miss Angelica McPherson—Farstone, the wedding—the finger in Judas McPherson’s brain—the Chinaman from thin air—impossible.

The memory of yesterday was tearing into a thousand shreds, leaving a cold darkness. He shuddered. Nina. Six hundred years. “So I guess you were right,” Angelica was saying, “you’re a prisoner. Get dressed, I’m taking you on safari.”

“What. . . ”

“Judas called, change of plans. You can never be too careful. A lot has happened in the meantime... There are many who have access to the Plateau even here, even through material interfaces from higher Traditions. They can see you.”

“They’ll see...” he yawned. “So what?”

How does one explain a prophecy from the Time Well to a resurrected man from the twenty-first-century? Defining the unknown by the known, she would have to tell him half of the “Multi-thesaurus.” At the last moment, she bit her tongue.

“People gossip.” Other Jesuit pupils. The Jesuits. We have to wait far away from them. Here are your new clothes. Please hurry.

Having said that, she left so that he could dress freely. She stood just behind the bend of the wall; hidden in the shadows, she remained invisible from the intersection of corridors. Father Frenete knew everything, of course, but she did not feel like answering the inquisitive questions of the other inhabitants of the monastery. They would undoubtedly be asking at the sight of her clothes, which clearly suggested that immediately after returning from the Wide World she was going on a longer expedition into the depths of the Dark Continent. The guy should hurry up. She tapped her heel nervously against the wall. The bells were ringing at prime.

Maybe I am really his guard, a prison warden. Maybe he really is a prisoner, and I am a guard. Such a relationship exists only between equals, someone is free, and I limit his freedom, illegally expanding my own freedom; I take what

belongs to him. When, however, there is no equality... The owner is not the guard of his dog, and the dog is not its prisoner, even if kept in a collar and on a chain. The owner, on the other hand, is its guardian. Or at least he should be.

What did Judas say to me? He did not use these words, but the meaning was clear, I give you this property - take care of it.

She flattered herself that she had told Zamoyski the truth, that from the beginning she had told him only the truth; it was a kind of extreme moral sport, never to lie to someone who was completely at your mercy and had to believe your every word.

Judas had indeed called, even before dawn. The conversation took place via ordinary audio devices, absolute retro and Orthodoxy. They had bypassed Plateau, they hadn't even used satellite connections; the signal ran by fiber optics, directly from Puermageze to Farstone.

Judas summarized. Armand *filius* Barański, an independent Inclusion of the hidden Tradition, informed the Lodge about the detection of a topological flaw in the Milky Way, about four thousand four hundred light years from the original location of Sol-Port. Someone had stolen over four cubic parsecs of space. The entire star system was contained in the removed space - now there was no trace of it. The Fangs sent by Civilization had only encountered a dozen or so Deformant installations in the area. They were estimated at two hundred or three hundred Fangs.

So was it a Deformant Port? They denied it. Even if sincerely - can any Deformant vouch for another Deformant? Certainly not for all of them. That's what Deformation is all about, that it does not recognize any civilizational norm.

In addition, several associations of Deformants demanded compensation from Civilization in kind, that is either in Fangs or in pure exotic matter. Compensation for what? Judas informed Angelica that a meeting of the Grand Lodge had been convened; it had not yet been publicly announced.

The situation was therefore beginning to take on the characteristics of a crisis. Some kind of game was being played here, and Judas did not know its rules, the stakes, or the identities of the players. To further confuse the picture, the Emperor, in connection with the investigation into the recent assassination attempts on McPherson, reported numerous disturbances in the empty Fields of

the HS Plateau, the source or method of which disturbances he had not been able to discover so far. This gave rise to another avalanche of hysterical hypotheses about the Flows. The media will revive all those hysterical mythologies about Plateau, the Enstahs will start their anti-progressive protests, the Horizontalists will renew their separatist demands, the EM parity will go up on the House exchanges...

The worst thing that could happen to the McPherson clan, was a war breaking out over a resurrected man they owned. The Lesser Lodge already seemed to be leaning towards taking away Gnosis' monopoly on the import of extra-civilizational knowledge. If now...

"Miss McPherson?"

She peered around the corner.

"Let's go!"

"My luggage from Farstone..."

"You don't have any more luggage."

"But..."

"What?"

"When we flew out of Farstone, you promised me that everything..."

"This is everything."

He was holding a bag and a briefcase.

"I flew from Warsaw on a Tranx-Pol corporate charter, I took a lot of stuff, a few suits..."

"You won't need suits now. Let's go."

"Wait! I have to call..."

"Who? Why?" Irritated, she kicked the wall. "Wake up! What did I tell you? You didn't fly from Warsaw! You don't work for any TranxPol! You have no one to call! What you remember - these are remnants of the catastrophe in your head. Has it finally sunk in?"

He watched her with interest for a long moment after she fell silent. She became embarrassed, lowered her gaze, her thick hair covered her face, a childish reflex. Zamoyski put down his luggage, took her by the hand - she stepped back, wanted to pull away, it didn't work, he was stronger, so she stopped struggling, raised her head defiantly - he took her by the hand and kissed the back of her hand.

"Angelica, my angel, lead me," he declaimed, smiling under his mustache.

I must guard him, I must control him. She moved quickly toward the side stairs. Why did you send him to me, Father? The one thing the Jesuits couldn't teach me, that Africa didn't, is the strength and weakness of a man.

THEY had slipped away unnoticed during mass. Angelica had already prepared the horses. They rode south, then turned southeast, then northeast, along the river. The rainy season was ending, and despite the night's downpour the riverbed was almost dry.

Zamoyski on horseback was a truly amusing sight. She looked back at him over her shoulder, and with each subsequent glance he had a more pained expression. He didn't even ask about anything, which was the clearest proof of Adam Zamoyski's complete dejection.

They dismounted for a siesta break (you had to see him dismount), the resurrected man lay down on his back in the shallow shade of the slope of the river gorge. He pulled his hat over his face and only from under the hat, safe from Angelica's mocking gaze, calmed his breathing, and growled his questions.

"Why?"

"Because everything must be done to avoid war."

"What do I have against your wars?" he snorted.

"You have been noticed. There is a possibility... There is a future in which..."

"Do you have time machines here?"

"What? No!" she snorted, irritated. "It's just..." she searched her head for a definition "chronopathic nodes of black holes allow particles with zero or near-

zero mass to move against the current of time."

"Ahh." The hat on his face did not even move.

Frustrated, she reached out and knocked it off his head. He blinked.

She leaned over Zamoyski, blocking out half of the blue sky from him.

"Controlled collapses are created, the geometry of the surrounding spacetime is krafted." She spoke the words slowly, leaving clear spaces between sentences. She saw him. Him — only a patch of shadow, and yet he could not look away; pinned him to the rocky ground, it wouldn't budge. "That's where probabilistic prophecies come from. You can work towards or against them. So, based on the information from the Gnosis Well, we're removing you from view to minimize the chance of war breaking out."

"What 'we'?"

"We. The McPhersons."

"But what do I have to do with this hypothetical war anyway?"

"I don't know. That's how it came out of the Well."

"Oh. Oh, great. How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

Why did he ask about her age? She stood up to lead the horses to the nearest puddle. The first person plural appeared on her lips in a reflex that surprised her and which she didn't quite understand. A week in Farstone had been enough; that week and the bitter poison of trust, so insidiously instilled into her veins in the desolate catacombs of the castle. Judas had clearly perfected the method, practicing it on countless children and grandchildren who, years and centuries before Angelica, had poured their orphan dreams into the cold stones of the Puermageze monastery.

She tried again to force herself to hate. (What a father, the Mechanic King, not a father...!). It didn't work. She felt like a McPherson. How could she oppose Judas, it was impossible to oppose him, there was no room for opposition, not the slightest crack remained. He confided his troubles, his plans and secrets in her - without even asking for discretion! He granted her the right to his name,

to his blood, and to his heritage in the most natural way possible. The trust Judas had shown had bound her more effectively than a dozen brain networks. She knew he had bribed her.

I wanted to be bribed, she whispered to her muddy reflection in the muddy puddle. I dreamed of this, I dreamed of it. Angelica McPherson. I was waiting for this. She grinned at the mud, the mud smiled back.

"How can I really convince myself that you're not lying to me from start to finish?" Zamoyski exclaimed, fanning himself with his hat.

"It's difficult," she admitted, having returned with the horses. "That's the point, to cut you off from the Plateau. But let's be honest, you're so completely ignorant with that twenty-first-century brain."

"Thanks for that."

"No need, it's from the bottom of my heart. You're so completely ignorant that you have no choice, you have to accept certain things on faith."

She sat down in the shade, stretched her legs, took out a bar, took a bite.

"Like the fact that you're not a Plateau construct yourself, and that this lizard is a lizard, and not an AI simulation."

"*Virtual reality*, huh?"

"No, not really. Inside an AI, you would be the same simulation as the lizard, only a bit more complicated."

"AI?"

"Semi-Inclusions. Inclusions that... Oh, that's true, that might confuse you. Inclusions are permanent cut-offs of space-time in the physical sense. Ports can be opened and closed at will; but maintaining a Port costs money. dekrafting an Inclusion requires a greater expenditure of energy, but it's a one-time expenditure. All parameters of the inclusion are established at the moment of dekrafting. So you cut off Inclusions with parameters selected according to various needs, for example the efficiency of the process. Logical inclusions - that's what is processed in these specialized Cut-offs, on such negentropians for which the parameters were selected. The Plateau is an Inclusion. The Emperor is an Inclusion. The

strongest AIs work within Inclusions that beat our UItimate Computer."

"Stop, rewind."

"Well, I guess even you have heard of the Ultimate Computer!"

"Yes," he snorted, "even I. A machine that cannot be bettered because it is limited only by physical constants. A computer that nothing can beat."

That Ultimate Computer is a machine as abstract as the Turing Machine, a model built on dry equations, a pure mental construct. At least that is how Zamoyski remembered it. The limit for it was supposed to be primarily the density of the logical cells. Also thermodynamics, that is, the radiation efficiency of the processor. Any clock rate faster than about 1016 times per second would burn to the ground, even if it radiated in the visible band — which is the most effective — like a small sun. The internal synchronization of the signal also set the limit, since it cannot be faster than light, even for relatively small computers, less than a meter in diameter, the unbreakable frequency is $10^{10}\ s^{-1}$. Then the wall, thus is not technological, but resulting from the very nature of the universe: from the fact that it is what it is.

Footnote to the Anthropic Principle, if better computers could exist, humans could not exist.

In Zamoyski's time, this was a given.

But now — now it is not my time.

He scratched the back of his neck.

"Inclusions better than the Ultimate Computer" they work on the basis of different laws of physics, right? It is the only way.

"That's what it is. Meta-physics. All the way to the UI, the Ultimatum Inclusion, the holy grail of meta-physics, a construct that processes with the optimal combination of constants. I don't follow it up to date, but there is already talk of three-billion generations. You see, each open Inclusion projects itself into the next, improved version, into the new physics - so we are talking rather about lines of identity... About the phrenes that move along these lines... A dozen or so manifested at the wedding, you must have seen these manifestations. But artificial intelligence in the sense in which the term was used in your time...

Hell! Half of the guests you talked to at Farstone would probably qualify.

“They weren’t human, I recognized that.”

“Really? From what?”

“Because it’s hard to recognize?”

“You know, I don’t really belong to their world either, I also felt alien there, I don’t move around them every day. Maybe that’s why father...” She licked her fingers thoughtfully. “Hmm, it’s not that you don’t see the differences, but that the differences are so common. The hardest thing - the hardest thing - is to draw the line.”

“The line? Between what?”

“Human and nonhuman. It...” she made an indecisive gesture with the rest of the baton “It blurs. In fact, everything, us, Gnosis, the Emperor, the entire Civilization, everything just serves this purpose, so that you can point and say ’this is a human’. It has long since become a political issue, they vote on such definitions in the Lodge, from century to century we spread out along the Curve wider and wider... Even us Stahs, even Stahs of the First Tradition, Judas, when he rises from the dead — even in this case there is such a moment, a break counted in plancks, when a human is only information, a disembodied structure of the mind, a naked phren.”

“What do you mean?”

“That every program or data is, is an orderly distortion of Plateau Fields.”

“Plateau” let me guess “some global computer network, ultracyberspace, right?”

“No, not really. First, there are millions, billions of them, nobody knows how many. Second, they are not in this world at all. They are inclusions with optimal combinations of physical constants for their purpose. For example, the cost and time of Trans is minimal from any place in the universe, a transfer to or from a Plateau takes one a-planck. Logical operations are performed at maximum speed, in Słowiński Time. ’Plateau’ - because of the location of these Inclusions in Remy’s Curve.”

“Wait! One a-planck from anywhere? What about the speed of light? That violates Einstein!”

“Eh, I guess not.”

Seeing his face, she giggled.

“Okay, I won’t be a smart aleck. You can read about it when we get back to Civilization. Since your time, there have been three or four generalizations of physics, including metaphysics; each subsequent one more subtle. What do you expect from a simple girl from the bush?”

“Well, you know what kind of world you live in. Your own family, your father... Alive, dead, resurrected, alive...”

“That’s what they say, resurrected. Just his phren, the structure of his brain. . . ”

“You can scan human brains and run simulations of their functioning in real time?”

“Ahh.”

“That’s impossible!” He sat up. Too abruptly — he winced with pain, arched his back, punched his side. “Ugh. This horse is going to finish me off. Just think, even if you examined every neuron, every synapse... So what?”

She shrugged.

“Why should I know about this? I’m not a cognitive scientist. They do it somehow.”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t want to, don’t believe. How much of your world would you be able to explain to some medieval peasant? He would have to believe in a light bulb.”

It looked like he was offended, maybe because of that ’peasant’. Angelica was close to another outburst. What right does he have to be offended at her for the truth? She answers this over-brained slob honestly, like a confessor, she doesn’t hide anything - and what does he do? He has a grudge. To hell with him.

THEY rode east. Zamoyski leaned both hands on the ball of the saddle and in this position rocked deeply from side to side. The grimaces of suffering were permanently etched into his sweaty face. When he dismounted, he continued to grimace, his muscles forgetting to relax. I should have foreseen this, Angelica thought, and at least chosen an inochodica for him. Zamoyski tolerated the walk better. Usually he stayed behind, she had to hold back her mount, turn around.

There was no need to go on longer reconnaissances This close to Puermageze, she knew this land too well. She had already planned the entire route for a week in advance in her mind, calculated the times to reach the next stops, her old camps. The war from the Well's prophecy was dated at plus seventy, so she was expecting at least two months of wandering with a cripple. Unless this war is a predetermined independent event that will happen just as surely with or without Zamoyski's participation.

Besides, the wastelands of Africa could be a good guarantee of isolation from Plateau, but they did not guarantee hiding from a determined investigator who knew the DNA of the wanted person. Nothing in the interior of the Port provided such a guarantee; and certainly not on the surface of one planet. Information would not leak to Plateau unless they came into contact with someone/something connected to Plateau, directly or indirectly; and we are all indirectly connected, satellites observe every square kilometer of the Earth, including the African steppes, so traces of our journey also end up on the HS Plateau Fields. So what can we achieve? At best, we can move to the outskirts of Civilization, minimize the chance of the prophecy coming true.

She pondered this as she gathered wood for the fire. The first camp was by a rocky spring surrounded by young trees. The grove grew south of a cleft in the steep slope of a basalt hill, lonely in the savannah; a stream flowed from the cleft.

Sometimes Angelica found this grove overrun by a horde of monkeys - this time she only had to kill an old mamba, which had curled up in a ball in the damp darkness under a rock. Zamoyski watched with wide eyes.

She secured and hid the pistol under her jacket.

"What?" she snorted, "it's just a snake."

She went to collect wood.

It was almost one hundred percent dark already, only Jupiter stood in the sky, she had to grope behind that wood; and where there was one, there might be another mamba. A stroke of luck, she thought. As usual.

“It could have bitten you,” Zamoyski said when she returned.

“It could have.”

“Oh, right, you rise from the dead.”

“Noo” she laughed, lighting the fire “I wasn’t the one who was resurrected, I was born in this body.”

He raised his hand to the height of his face, closed it into a fist, opened, closed, opened, in the light of the small, greasy flames jumping on the wood his skin was dark yellow, almost brown. He shifted his gaze to Angelica, who was rummaging through the saddlebags — the whites of the girl’s eyes were the only bright spots in her now completely black face.

“I don’t remember another body.”

“If it had bitten me — I wouldn’t have remembered that in the new hollow either.”

“But you would remember. . . ”

“Yourself before the recording, yes.”

“When was that? The last recording.”

She shrugged.

“A few months ago.”

“I don’t remember any recordings — such technology didn’t exist — this body. . . ”

“I’ll tell you how they did it.” She hung the canteen over the fire, took out the meat and the knife, and began to cut. “They extracted the remains. They read the DNA and the phren. They planted the phren into a Plateau AR. Every phren has some image of itself, which is how consciousness differs from unconscious

programs. If the image did not match the phenotype derived from the DNA, they built a body on a new DNA, as long as it matched the image. Of course you don't remember another body, that's all you remember about your body."

"People have false images of themselves." He took a stick out of the fire and began to draw asymmetrical shapes on the ground. "When you look in the mirror, you see all sorts of strange things. In reality, I could have been a transgender woman, for example."

"Ha, ha, ha."

"I remember the first time I saw myself in a movie, a friend from school sent me a preview from his phone, I saw myself moving, from behind, from profile, turning, looking at my own movement... To look at myself from the outside — shock. Him — me — him — me — him. Actors must have differently built brains."

"Do you remember what you looked like then?"

"As a child? A clumsy little guy with protruding teeth, a stupid smile, and bulging eyes."

"I was very thin. Skin and bones. You could count my ribs."

"Your whole life was in Puermageze? You have friends there, girlfriends."

"I didn't tell them anything, if that's what you mean."

"No, I. . . "

"Marta, Erie, Justyna, Pączuś, Hilbert, Goates, Alamreva..."

"Maciek, Krzysiek, Little Ewka, Little Blackie, my God, you are as similar as two peas in a pod! Only now, as I recall. . . "

"Ewka?"

Confused, he laughed. He rubbed his neck with his left hand, erased the ground drawings with his right. He threw a stick into the fire.

Angelica stood up, threw the meat into the boiling water.

"I don't want to scare you, but these things happen."

"What things?"

She didn't look at him.

"The combination of two phrenes during synthesis. Let's say they declare me dead. After the time of contact written in the will passes, the resurrection procedure begins. They wake the hollow, imprint the last record of my phren in its brain. Then I find myself alive. But there can't be two Angelica McPhersons in Civilization, the uniqueness of biological manifestation is part of the statutory definition of Stahs. So synthesis occurs. In your case, the structure of the phrenes was damaged as a result of mechanical damage to its carrier. . . "

"My brain was torn apart."

"Yes. So that's why. But the effects are similar. When a phren is reconstructed, memory and personality fill the arcs, find a new balance... Father Teofil suffered from this. His favorite, little Jane - he swore that Teofil's sister looked the same when they were children. That's why people after synthesis spend hours looking through family chronicles and public scans from Plateau."

"So why didn't they let me look at the chronicles from the time of the *Wolszczan* expedition? Didn't they survive?"

"Judas said. . . "

"What?"

"You're not in them."

He continued massaging his neck. Angelica was stirring in the canteen, turned sideways.

"I'm not here" he muttered.

"This body is not there, there is no Adam Zamoyski in the registers."

He lay on his back, putting his hands under his head. In the opening between the treetops yawned the black emptiness of the starless sky of Sol-Port.

"All right," Angelica raised her voice "but this Ewka — you didn't say who you synthesized me with."

He laughed, at first with a squeeze, then, appreciating the girl's intentions, almost sincerely.

"A cousin. Kisses behind the hedge. She bit my ear."

"I don't bite."

"She died of leukemia during her studies."

"I won't die."

He smiled at the empty sky.

"Even if this or that hollow dies" she continued, bustling around the fire. "It will always be just a broken mirror. I wonder if there were mirrors in which a naked phren could see themself..."

The familiar sounds of this bustle had a sleep-inducing effect, Zamoyski heard Angelica's words, but he stopped paying attention to their meaning, they flowed past, another melody of the African night, the fire crackled, spots of shadow and light, trembling, overlapped on the sloping wall of the undergrowth, some animal whined behind the trees... he fell asleep.

Angelica looked at him through the wood sparks rising in the smoke. He was snoring lightly. She stopped talking (she caught herself explaining something to him again). She took the flask from the fire. In a way, you are my child, Mr. Zamoyski. I am sculpting you. A memory of another conversation, by another fire, came to her. *This is how we shape them, perhaps even more deeply than simply sculpting DNA.* Father knew you would be most susceptible now, he must have been aware. Why hadn't he told me honestly? Would I have refused? I couldn't refuse. She sat down on a rotten branch, slurped hot soup. The man was snoring louder and louder. The image leapt above the flames, the outlines of Zamoyski's body melted away. She bit her lip. Sweet, that hollow. The AI had failed, but—two months alone, no other face, no other voice—I will grow into your bleeding memory like a weed, like a tumor, you won't get rid of me for the rest of your life.

He woke up suddenly, pulled by the guts of his soul by a devil's claw. His leg jumped; he sat up and saw that he was kicking the ashes of a fire. Green

shadows danced over the glade by the stream, turning in a morning kaleidoscope, alternating with the slanting columns of sunlight. The grove was rustling and screeching. The horses stood still.

Zamoyski's muscles were like stone, he tried to stand up and only cursed; he tried again and fell. Now he was completely covered in ash. I have to wash myself, he thought. I have to take a leak, I have to change, I have to drink something, my throat is raw, ugh. On the third attempt he stood on his feet. On the opposite side of the ash heap, Angelica lifted an eyelid, glanced, waved her hand and fell asleep again.

He hobbled to the stream, and then a dozen or so meters along its course. The grove was small and before Adam knew it, he emerged into the savannah. He immediately got sun in his eyes, making them water. He watered the last tree; urine splashed on the bark in a fountain of tiny drops, almost beautiful.

Groaning and cursing under his breath, he took off his clothes and entered the cold water. Everything was so bright, so clear, as if the world had switched to *high definition* at night. Very colorful birds watched Zamoyski, tilting their heads left and right. He splashed, snorted and croaked.

He didn't take soap or a towel - he then walked naked around the grove to let his skin dry. The sun in the light blue sky seemed absurdly large, blinding to him. Didn't they manipulate the orbits of the planets in this Sol-Port?

As he dressed, he looked along the stream to the south, a simple shot of a glance towards the horizon. A few hundred meters away, another bulb of dense green rose above the grass: treetops, shadows of rocks, striking color contrasts of hot flora. Africa, he thought - and for the first time he believed it. Two months, probably more. Wilderness. He smiled under his mustache. I don't even remember if I haven't already made such a journey... Oh, great, what had it come to, it happened to me like it...!

Breathing through his mouth - inhale, inhale, inhale, until it tickled his lungs, exhale - he set off towards that greenery in the south. He was already getting used to the burning pain in his muscles. He picked a long blade of grass and put it between his teeth. His hair was still wet, but it was drying quickly too. He felt like whistling. Can I even whistle? He grinned stupidly at the blue sky. After all - who wouldn't really like to have the opportunity to see what the world would look like in a hundred, two hundred, six hundred years? I'm in an even better

situation, not remembering, I don't regret it. I had consciously decided then to take part in this *Wolszczan* expedition, so I must have had little to lose. Nina? There never was any Nina.

He entered the trees, the stream disappeared somewhere, there were rocks here too, he made his way through the thorny thickets, turned towards the sun and emerged into a clearing. Angelica was sleeping by the campfire burnt down. One of the horses looked suspiciously at Adam. Zamoyski's footprints were running in the sand by the stream, leading along the bank to the south.

Zamoyski stood and watched. Incoherent thoughts were swirling in his head, a dozen or so questions without subject or predicate. He spat out the blade of grass. He carefully retreated back to the savannah. He looked north, from where he had come. He went around the grove and looked south: stream, savanna, grove.

After a moment's hesitation, he circled the thickets again and returned the same way, straight north. He even noticed some of the blades of grass he had broken earlier. He had pissed here; he had bathed there. He followed the stream all the way to the clearing. Angelica was sleeping, the horse was leering.

Zamoyski had second thoughts.

He sat down on his saddle. I'll wake her up, he thought helplessly, and she'll explain everything to me.

In the meantime, he sat and watched. She was lying on her left side, with her knees drawn up to her chin, her right hand partially covering her face. In the slow movements of her chest, he read the rhythm of her calm breathing. A small, light green insect was wandering along the dark smoothness of her cheek. When it reached her eye, I'll wake her up. Her lips parted slightly during exhalation, forming the first stage of a grimace of astonishment; an astonished women always look a little younger. On the other hand, during exhalation, she was shockingly childlike in the plumpness of her chin and the impeccability of her bronzed complexion.

Zamoyski suddenly became convinced that he had done this in the past, that this was his habit, a nervous tic of the soul: to watch them sleep. This is the most subtle of types of intimacy, because it is the only one that guarantees one hundred percent sincerity of the object. The tyrants of daylight relax the masks

of their faces in their sleep, the heaps of Zeus' wrinkles melt like butter on a baking sheet, the skin, freed from tension, flows into the oldest of remembered forms, the most true. The victims of the sun-time — in their sleep they frown against invisible oppressors, utter decisive grunts, move their jaws energetically.

I used to wake up like this — he supposed — at night, in the morning, and watch her eyeballs move under her eyelids, following the seraphim flying over the land of dreams; as, driven by reflex associations, brief reflections of the expressions she makes on the other side flit across her face — like quick clouds in the autumn sky. Her complete defenselessness captivates me. She is most beautiful when she does not know it.

The insect climbed onto the girl's black eyebrow, Zamoyski stood up, approached and shook Angelica.

"Something happened," he announced. "The south has been looped somehow, the savannah has clenched into a fist. I walk in circles in my own footsteps."

"So they have us," she said, sitting up, instantly awake.

"Who?"

She shrugged.

"The ones who caught us." She stood up and stretched. "They are listening and watching now."

He held back a grimace.

"So where are we? Not on Earth?"

She shrugged again.

"What do you mean by 'where'? Here? 'Where' will only be where they open us at. What significance does it have for the interior of Sol-Port, where Fangs fly?"

"But the Sun" he pointed with his hand "I see the Sun!"

"It's true, you do see it"

She went to the stream, knelt down, took some water, drank.

"Then they'll kill us" she said.

"What?"

"They always kill."

"Then? After what?"

"After they take what they kidnapped us for." She looked over her shoulder at Adam. "This is politics, Mr. Zamoyski. Always and everywhere it's about one thing, information. I'm very sorry."

She took a deep breath, ran her wet hands through her hair.

"Apparently war was inevitable."

Sak

KRAFT

The non-gravitational modeling of space-time.

Progresses Developed by the Ushas and Rahabs from inflaton physics as the Four Progresses. The theory and practice of kraft enabled the development of meta-physics.

↳The optimal energy tool of craft is the so-called Fang. A single Fang enables a linear, vector Kraft (e.g. creating a kraftwave, the saddle of which moves faster than light in the external system). Two Fangs enable tensor Kraft. Three Fangs allows the complete folding of space-time, i.e. the creation of a Port. In advanced meta-physical engineering, larger, precisely defined quantities of Fangs are required.

↳ More popular forms of craft:

- ↳ qFTL wave.
- ↳ Port.
- ↳ En-Port (Multiple Ports).
- ↳ Sak.
- ↳ Inclusion (Cut-Off Port).
- ↳ Dekraft (The "ripping" of a Port).
- ↳ Crosskraft (nonparallel, dual tensor kraft).
- ↳ Krafthole (one-sided energy drain).
- ↳ Trans.
- ↳ "Tuning" black holes (e.g. to a Time Well).

"Multithesaurus" (HS Subcode)

He finally fell into the grass, out of breath.

But the body remembers, the body has autonomous memory, he thought. I used to run. I used to run often and for a long time, I liked running. The body remembers.

Only after a second, when he caught his breath, he realized that was bullshit — two, three weeks, not older, they grew it from the simplest proteins, it remembers nothing, except nanomatic blood and mechanical wombs.

Angelica watched him from under the last tree in the grove.

“I would say about six hundred meters.”

“No” he nodded. The sun was beating down on his eyes, he shielded himself with his forearm. ”Around, as far as I can tell. But up? Up there — what? The sky?”

“There are methods” she assured. She sat down on roots rising above the grass, scraped something off her heel with a knife. ”They put us into a Sak.”

“This Sak... Something like a Port, I suppose.”

“More or less. I mean... I guess they had to use something like that. We were inside the Sol-Port, after all, and anyone leaving the Port must have the authorization of the Pilots’ Council. My father is a member of it. They would never have released Fangs with a closed Port right after stealing a piece of Earth. The Fangs would have nowhere to hide inside the Sol-Port either. It’s a lost cause. Madness.”

“So what do you think they did?”

“They wrapped us in a Sak. It’s basically the same Kraft as with the Ports; except here the Fangs are inside the fold and support it from there. That’s how it was presented to me in theory — that there are at least two sets of Fangs. One wraps space with themselves; the other, also wrapped, maintains the normal Port. You know, a bubble within a bubble, an onion.”

“In that case, we would be in this inner Port.”

“Ah. Because after all - how else...?”

He rubbed the lump on the back of his head thoughtfully.

“Is there a record of the Fangs inside Sol-Port? Then all it would take would be a quick inventory and the missing ones would point to the perpetrator. Right?”

Angelica laughed sarcastically.

“It’s not that simple.” She took out and put on her black glasses. ”Think for a moment.”

He propped himself up on his elbow, peering into the shadows where she was hiding.

“Is this some kind of riddle? I don’t know anything about your super technologies.”

She pouted.

”And. You have all the data. It’s obvious.”

She was baiting him, playing with his ignorance, he could see that.

Of course he took up the challenge.

“They smuggled it in a Sak too! They only opened it for the moment of kidnapping. Right? Am I right?”

“See, you’re already getting the hang of it.”

“Don’t treat me like a child!” He looked away. ”It’s like a disease. The handicap isn’t my fault. I’ve always hated that way nurses and doctors talk to adult patients like they’re pre-schoolers. It makes your blood pressure so high that I wouldn’t be surprised if the chatter alone caused a few hospital heart attacks.”

“Gosh, you’re so touchy, I beg your pardon, Mr. Zamoyski.”

He stood up and headed upstream to get a drink. But he was still turning the Sak riddle over in his mind and, having returned, attacked Angelica from a different angle.

“But you should have expected that! You can smuggle any number of Fangs into and out of any Port in a Sak! Don’t you have any defense systems? At least detection systems - because I know how that manifests itself on the outside...”

Angelica was clearly confused.

“It’s not like that”

“How is it then?”

He stood over her, shadow over shadow - and as he asked, he moved even closer. He reconsidered in mid-gesture. He walked away to the neighboring tree, leaning against the trunk.

The girl looked at Zamoyski over her glasses. Anger played in him. He was just waiting for a half-smile on her lips. But nothing, she just watched.

“What now?”

“You’re still trying to catch me in a lie.”

“What?”

“You don’t believe in this world. You think we’re deceiving you, that I won’t be able to explain something and — *voila!* — I’ll have exposed the illusion!”

“Explain, not explain... But since I see obvious contradictions. . . ”

“So what? Let’s do a test.” She rubbed her hands together. ”Tell me a story from your life. Any one. No. Please.”

“You’re going to find contradictions in it, right? Fuck you. I know I have a mess in my memory anyway.”

“Coward.”

“Is this how children have fun at the Jesuits? In confession?”

“Coward, coward. What are you afraid of? You’re a fucking introvert. You have to talk. You don’t know what you remember until you try to tell it. You don’t know what you really think about a given topic until you start arguing about it with someone. When you’re alone, you’re not even aware of your contradictions. What do you think a confession is for? What, maybe you’ve never

been to a psychoanalyst?"

"Oh, you won't be my psychoanalyst!"

"You'll be remembered as you are."

Short circuit, how to react? He laughed. She looked at him suspiciously. He fell silent and sat down under a tree, her eyes two arms' lengths away behind the matte blackness of his glasses.

"They listen, right?" he mumbled.

"They listen and watch" she nodded. "Everything."

"Time isn't on their side. We should be dead by now, right?"

She shrugged.

"Time is also subject to modeling by Fangs. There are various deflections and cut-offs of space-time. It is a big branch of metaphysics. I only know the generalities."

"They are listening" he repeated.

"Yes."

A great silence began. No movement, no breath, no rustle of fabric, so that the other person would not notice. They were aware of each other even of their own constraint, and constraint of this awareness. Here *savoir-vivre* breaks down, thought Zamoyski. From the moment of threat to life, all canons of behavior lose their *raison d'être* — because what significance can they have in the face of the end? None, none. Absolute freedom, indeed.

But he was just now experiencing that this was not true!

He did not understand it. What was shackling him, since in this Sak they had both *de facto* already crossed the border of death and their current form of existence was rather a kind of appendix of the basic line of life? After all, if Judas reads the phrenium archived earlier by McPherson's cognitive scientists again, that Adam wouldn't remember any of this - life will follow a new, parallel path.

So? Do I believe or not that I am dead?

“When will Judas find out?” he asked.

“Hmm?”

“23 About the kidnapping. “When?”

She tilted her head thoughtfully.

“That depends on how they played it. Did they go for a full-scale cover-up...”

“He lost contact, after all, he’ll definitely be interested...”

“No, no, contact was lost when we left Puermageze, that’s how it was supposed to be, removing you beyond the event horizon. If Judas had contacted us, even just to check if everything was in order, we would have been influenced, you would have influenced him, his decisions.”

“Seventy days! Right? So they. . . ”

“I told you, it’s a done deal.” She adjusted her glasses. “Besides, you can’t patch up a hole in the inf without noticing it, everyone will find out very soon anyway, the Emperor would be the First... Academic musings, give it a rest.”

Explode, he said to himself. Now.

“But you have to be crazy...!” he shouted. “This is inhuman! You’re still alive, we both are! How can you suddenly say that It’s a foregone conclusion, that I will only really live on after being imprinted in a hollow? What? Snap, you’re switching to involuntary mode? Who thinks so?! It’s impossible!”

“For you.”

“For you? I don’t believe it.”

“Well, you’re breaking my heart.”

He let out a breath from his lungs, shook his head.

“Get rid of the instinct for self-preservation on command” he whispered. “Some masochistic Zen exercises. Impossible, impossible.”

She watched him over the top of her glasses; he closed his eyes, he didn't see her, she could look like that.

Impossible. She ran her tongue over her gums, puffed out her cheek. Of course it was impossible. Just as complete truthfulness, absolute fidelity, universal beauty are impossible. When he told her about wrapping the savannah, and she knelt down by the stream and looked at her own reflection in the water - in that same moment she gained the certainty that she wouldn't be hysterical here, that she wouldn't burst into curses and cry. "Then they'll kill us," she said dryly, and she was blinded by the memory of Judas McPherson handing the waiter his glass so that the nanomatic murderess wouldn't spill those few drops of wine when she tore out his spine. Zamoyski imagines too much, these aren't psychological perversions, she hasn't gone mad. Any other reaction would be simply... unnatural. If I had...

The sun fell from the sky.

Angelica's reflexes contradicted her words. She jumped to her feet, her hand clenched around the handle of her knife.

The earth jerked upwards beneath her feet, the plumb line turned, and a mountain of warm mud fell on Angelica. If Adam had screamed, she hadn't heard it; nor her own—so perhaps she really hadn't been so afraid after all.

Heavy goo pressed into her mouth, her nose, her eyelids. There was no question of drawing fresh air into her lungs. Two minutes, she thought; and a great shiver shook her as she saw how surely and without a doubt she had determined the length of her remaining life.

The hot mass pressed in from all sides, twisting her limbs, stretching her joints, pressing on her vertebrae. It crushed her body.

Suddenly, straight from cold analysis— Angelica fell into a final panic. I'm going to die! I'm going to die! She sucked mud into her mouth in quick gulps.

Amazing, she had always been convinced that, when push came to shove, she would be terrified by the accompanying pain, not by the fact of death itself. After all, death was a cut, the border of nothingness, a zero-time point, a subplank event, unfeeling. Bodily pain was something else. Meanwhile, it was the other way around, the suffering of the body was even soothing in a way — but the

awareness of the approaching end, the very knowledge of the inevitable, so close, at the end of that breath...

She bit the stones. She ate the earth. She sucked mud into her lungs.

Shhh! Weightlessness, a fall into the abyss. Choking, she lifted her eyelids and saw darkness. My eyeballs were sealed shut! She waved her hands towards her face, but before she reached it, the fall ended, she hit the hard ground. Knee, hip, elbow - electricity shot through her. Earth fell on Angelica in great lumps of clay, smaller and larger stones struck like hail. Fractions of seconds - and she was buried again, again she could not move. The pressure was no longer so great, but what difference did it make when, instead of air, gravel and sand and thick mud pressed against her lips and squeezed into her nostrils? I will die, I will die.

She could already feel her lungs burning, the fire reaching her windpipe. Cold limbs, trembling fingers, pounding blood, red under eyelids, spasmodically sucking in clods of earth that were hurting her tongue and palate, she would soon lose consciousness and fall into warm darkness, when the oxygen-deprived brain refused to process the phrenium any further. Even the catharsis of the body was denied her, because she could not move, release the hysteria, buried alive... The end.

Pulled out of the darkness, she curled up in a coughing convulsion, waving her arms blindly. She heard a scream, something pushed her in the back, twisted her arm.

She had no idea what was happening, her dulled senses only let in information about pain, and it came from her chest, from behind her sternum.

She spat blood, saliva and sand. Air! She bit it out from under her face with short jerks of her head; every other breath was blocked by foreign bodies in her trachea.

Finally the sound reached her ears and Angelica heard him wheeze; it was not the sound she would have expected from a human being.

The fire in her lungs was receding. She fell helplessly onto her back.

She slowly raised her hand (a hundred pounds, a dead boulder) and wiped the layer of mud from her face. Someone immediately helped her, gently cleaning

her eyes.

She blinked.

“Sit down,” Zamoyski told her, raising the torch higher so as not to singe her hair. “Bend over. Drink, you’ll have to vomit.”

A hazy blur - that was how she saw his face.

She focused her eyes with an effort. He had a thick, black beard. With his left hand he was holding out a canteen to her. A silver-feathered bird with three heads was sitting on his shoulder.

She reached out for the water and lost consciousness.

Zamoyski put the canteen away. He tucked the knife that Angelica had stabbed with in the shoulder with into his boot. Putting down the torch, he picked up the girl and carried her out into the light. He jumped over the wall of water and entered the cave under the crooked vault of the wind-swept savannah. He laid Angelica on the prepared bed. The last snake was slowly smoking over the sparse fire. A slender Fang was turning over the purple horizon.

Zamoyski sat down in the shade of a cool boulder, washed and bound the wound. If infection sets in now, he thought, and I am threatened with inevitable death – will they show up then, will they react in some way? They did not intervene for Angelica. But was it her they were after?

Then – because then he was convinced that they had finally decided to drain his brain and were taking him to their interrogation chambers, somewhere deep with secret analytical machines. The sun went out and something pulled him down, the earth opened up under his feet, he only saw Angelica getting to her feet with a knife in her hand and thought - what a pity - after which the black leviathan swallowed him. Her words still rang in his ears: ”It’s a foregone conclusion.” He didn’t struggle. He flew into the darkness, calm - if not in spirit, then at least in body.

He was shaken by the shock of sudden cold when he fell into the water with a loud splash. No, that splash came from all sides: more than one Zamoyski had fallen here from sunny Africa - tons of earth had fallen, Angelica had fallen with them, probably the entire grove, trees, animals... They passed him in the depths, in the eddies of the turbulent water, dragging behind them braids of air

bubbles; something caught him on his trouser leg, he tore himself free.

He swam back to the surface, took a breath. He rubbed his eyes and, snorting, looked around in the darkness. Zero orientation. Besides, could you even talk about directions in a Sak? One direction stood out with a grey glow emanating from it, while the others were cloaked in dense darkness – so Zamoyski swam there, towards the light.

In the absence of a reference point for time and space, he focused on counting the strokes of his arms. After four hundred, when he checked, his feet hit the ground. He crawled out onto the shore. He tore some weeds from his feet, which were twining around his knees.

The border of light and darkness, sharp and clear like the line of life and death, ran through the ground a few dozen meters away. Where am I, in some cave? Lying on a rocky beach of shadow, he turned on his back. He couldn't see any ceiling. He was breathing heavily. The muscles of his legs and arms trembled in a series of contractions and spasms. Water splashed in his shoes. It smelled of old burnt flesh.

He closed his eyes and began to laugh.

Then he stepped out into the sunlight and was struck. Disaster. Something had gone wrong in the hands of the gods, something had snapped in the mechanisms of the Fang. It was impossible that this was what their captors had wanted when they had taken them into the Sak.

Nothing was in its place. Not even the earth and the sky. He looked where the light was coming from, where the source of that heat that was drying his skin and clothes was - there was no sun there. There, bending in a parabolic arc towards infinity, the yellow-green savannah stretched out. He saw the ends of that land-in-the-sky, the sides of the tongue of rock and sand - as if someone had cut a piece of a cake and pressed it into the firmament; but not deep enough.

The savannah in the sky tore space and time apart: on the left, night (from which he had emerged), on the right - day (a narrower crescent).

True, inside a properly wrapped Port, you could see spaces and objects not included in the Port - the image of the Sun, not the Sun itself - based on the same principle, they pumped out the radiated energy of the star from Sol-Port

- but Angelica said that...

Angelica! They were so close - she too should have fallen into that lake. He looked back into the darkness. She didn't scream—but neither did he as he flew into the water.

Well, if she didn't swim, she was done for.

He stood on the edge of night and called to her in a loud voice, once, twice, three times.

Silence.

Is she dead?

She didn't care—why should I care...?

Nevertheless, he stood there, his back in the heat, his face in shadow, and called to the cold darkness for a few more minutes.

Then he returned to the sun—to its light, the glow of distant blue.

He looked at the nearest cluster of trees. Unbelievable—it was that damned grove again! And just like before: a few hundred meters away, another one. And another. And another.

He looked in the opposite direction, began to count the patches of lush green. After twenty he had to tilt his head. In the sky it went faster, foreshortening reduced the distances.

The line of distinctive features of the n-folded savannah section disappeared at the point where day and night met.

"Something's gone wrong with the Sak," Zamoyski muttered.

He unlaced and took off his soaked shoes and socks. Gazing at the meeting point of infinity, he walked across the savannah strip. He counted well over two kilometers - the loop had widened after the catastrophe.

On one side of him was darkness and water - but what on the other? Not in the sky - which I could see from here, but lower, under my feet. What was there?

But when he had walked two thirds of the distance, the spheres turned - and now he was standing on a peaceful plain stretching from horizon to horizon, under the turquoise, cloudless sky of Africa, with the sun at its zenith. Now he could see it clearly (when he looked through his eyelashes): a circle whiter than white, the color of pain.

He backed up until he found the exact moment, the place where the horizons began to straighten out.

Great. Not only won't you see, but even if you do see, you won't get there.

He remembered an old topology joke. How do you cage a wild lion? Get into a cage, lock it, put the key in your pocket, wait for the lion to appear, and then invert it relative to the bars of the cage. The lion is now in the cage, and us outside.

He toddled to the nearest grove. On the way, he cut his heel, and the sky split again.

In the grove, in a clearing by the stream, stood the horses, and around the burnt-out fire lay Zamoyski's and Angelica's bedding, saddles, and blankets.

Adam sat down in the same place from which an hour ago he had watched the sleeping girl. He watched the reflections of the sun swim along the curve of the metal canteen; Angelica told him to wash it, he didn't.

What happened? For God's sake, what have they done to us?

He put on his not-quite-dry shoes and, following the stream - it murmured just as silvery, the same birds were making noise in the greenery - he came out in front of the grove. The last trees - here. There was a crater left, like after a two-ton bomb, an old scree, on whose slopes grass and young bushes were already growing. He went down. Water gathered at the bottom, insects buzzed over the still puddle. If I started digging here... How much - two, three meters? Would I break through the sky above the night lake?

In any case, the destruction seemed disproportionately small. He remembered that the sun had set, the earth had opened up, the world had turned upside down. How could that be? After all, they weren't really gods; they simply had more knowledge and more energy for domestic use. Angelica had time to teach me. What does it matter that I don't know anything? Even with poor data, the

same rules of logic must be applied.

So? (A hyena's head appeared over the edge of the funnel, the hyena yawned, stuck out its tongue.) So? Maybe it's just the wrong grove after all. No, that's stupid: there's only one grove, in reality no one copied anything here, it would be the same violation of the laws of physics as *perpetual motion*. This is the grove; and what happened happened.

He returned to the clearing. (His muscles ached terribly, now he felt the fatigue gnawing at his veins more clearly.) He returned to the clearing and despaired again. The horses lay dead, clouds of loudly buzzing flies were rotating over the stinking carcasses. At the sight of Zamoyski, five hyenas raised their heads. They were finishing the remains of meat on dirty bones.

He drove the scavengers away with a long branch. They had retreated only to the edge of the thicket. Adam examined the horses—what was left of them. He noticed the strange curve of their necks, the crookedly raised heads, even twisted by the posthumous bridles, still tied to the maple a good meter above the ground.

The campfire—almost overgrown. He had to bend down to find the blankets and the rest of his belongings in the grass. A family of beetles lived in a rusty mess tin.

Why didn't I notice anything? he wondered. I had walked this road twice. I should have known.

With the branch held straight ahead, he set off again along the stream to the place of the collapse. This time he walked very slowly, foot by foot, carefully observing the movements of the surrounding vegetation, the flight path of insects and birds, the play of light and shadow on the water, leaves, bark, and finally the water itself—how it piled up, how it spilled, with what verve it jumped over stones. He held the branch like a dowser, sensitive to the slightest change in its weight.

He recognized the Zone when the wind blew. All around the grass lay on the ground, while there only the image of the grass blurred slightly, as if the blades, each separately, had vibrated very quickly. The border of the Zone was not sharp, and this oval of a dozen or so meters, adjacent to the sandy bank of the stream on the left, stood out most clearly on the perimeter, where small whirlpools of dust

and sand rose, butterflies flew rapidly along completely unbutterfly parabolas, and the grass lay in wide fans in the calm air. Zamoyski threw the branch with a full swing. It whirred, falling in a steep arc into the middle of the Zone. At a height of about twenty meters, it accelerated to crash into the grass so quickly that Zamoyski actually did not see it falling there - it flashed before his eyes in a vertical movement.

"Well, yes. Fangs. Time and space."

Out of curiosity, he went to the next grove.

Of course, the Zone was there too. And what could he expect? It was the same stream, the same branch.

He must have been really tired, because only after collecting his things from the clearing and making a selection of equipment, packing two saddlebags - only after slapping himself on the forehead and cursing. Not this Zone! Time should not speed up, but slow down! Somewhere along the way I must have passed another one, oriented in the opposite direction.

The Sak, he thought dimly, his gaze wandering across the sky, between night and day, over a long wedge of sun-scorched earth. The Sak - that is, what was left of the Sak. They must have dug hard... the Sak tore itself apart lengthwise and widthwise, torn apart at the seams.

The longer he thought about it, the less it made sense. They were raping physics here before his eyes, and all he could do was watch with his mouth open. This fucking Sak is one big patchwork of time and space, you put your hand in your pocket and scratch your ear tomorrow, you can get a boner.

He moved to the edge of the grove, under the shade of the last trees, where the nauseating smell of carrion did not reach. He stretched out on the warm earth. After all, he had woken up from a night's sleep only a few hours ago - and yet his eyes were closing by themselves. Besides... hours, seconds, years - who can be sure? At least the body won't lie to me, the body remembers.

But why am I still alive at all? Why didn't it turn us into cold void? I shouldn't be alive... Twice, thrice — I shouldn't be..

He fell asleep.

He then walked around the area with his bags slung over his shoulder, a stick in his hand. First within the borders of the savannah strip, then deviating towards the blue sky.

He hesitated for a long time before leaving the loop. He even had the idea of entering the slowest of the Zones and waiting there, until... Until what? Anything. After all, he was still a prisoner, nothing had changed here.

He hesitated — but in the end he made a decision and stepped out onto the endless plain. He had a strange certainty that after a few days of fruitless waiting in the Zone, he wouldn't be able to stand it anyway and would attempt even more desperate acts.

So he entered the plain. The sun hung overhead, an open tunnel to the hellish abysses — it was good that his hat had survived. Snakes and lizards were running away from under his shoes. He walked until his legs ached. Then he sat down, took a drink of water from his canteen. He looked around. A tree, a boulder, a tree, a buffalo skull. He turned back. He saw the grove after only a few minutes.

The plain was endless — endless, because it was also looped.

What was left? Only the direction of march. The cardinal directions.

Here none of the cardinal directions were the cardinal directions. He could only orient himself according to the edge of the savannah strip that curled up on the firmament. That is, only at the beginning, while he could see it behind him in the sky. For the cosmic astrolabe was quickly turning, the spheres were completing themselves, and he was entering the eternal noon of the African summer.

While the first time he had walked, according to his own conviction, perpendicularly to that edge, the second time — at an angle of about sixty degrees, measured from the left hand. And this time he counted his steps.

A dictaphone would come in handy, he thought fleetingly. In Angelica's bag he found a notebook. The first dozen or so pages were written on; she wrote in French, he didn't know French. Towards the end of the notes, however, he noticed the words "Zamoyski" repeated, and then, "Adam." He smiled under his mustache. She had small, slanted handwriting, but some of the capital letters

showed through with their curls a few lines up and down.

He tore out the written pages and stuffed them behind the cover. Now this would be a notebook for a kamikaze geographer.

Zamoyski's notes were as follows (he wrote in Polish):

60°/650: cascading gravity, tail of Suns, on the left Zone -T 30°/'140: short loop
↳ *exit to 150°: metallic construct (?)*
↳ *exit to 120°: plain etc. (up to 1000 flat loop at 90°)*
↳ *exit to 90 °: lake of night, very short loop (the same weed!)*
↳ *exit to 60°: ! Zone +++T (sharp cut) U exit to 30°: loop, cont.*
↳ *exit to 0°: loop, cont.*
↳ *exit to 330°: Mobius loop, about 50 m to the sky, reflection of the savannah, I see myself from above (i.e. from below); I threw a stone there, it landed next to it; does it develop analogously in other 3D directions?*
↳ *exit to 90°/340 (behind the termite nest): water curtain (?)*
↳*?*
↳*??*
120°/820: Pandemonium!
150°f40: b, tight loop (I see my own back)
↳ *exit to 90°: loop, cont. (at least to 1000)*
↳ *exit to 60°/200: probably a mild T-zone(?)*
↳ *exit to 30°/15: misaligned gravity, drop to 70°, dangerous landslide U exit to 120°/1000: loop, cont., but:*
↳ *120°/230*
↳ *exit to 135°/10: torn surface, numerous G and T zones, negative curvature of space, dense tangle, tunnels (?)*

So on, and so forth, in a thousand branches — like an ant wandering through a crumpled napkin.

The notation "60°/200" meant two hundred steps at a sixty-degree angle to the boundary of the savannah's sky belt.

He used question marks in brackets to indicate places that clearly opened passages to further Sak developments.

That Pandemonium at 120°/820 was a vast sinkhole in a weak Zone of -g, in which a cloud of shadow was boiling.

As Zamoyski approached, a dozen protrusions emerged from it. They reached out towards him: hands, paws, tails, faces on flexible necks, human and inhuman, bloody spines, proboscises, leeches, tentacles, pincers, umbilical cords, intestines, earthworms. He retreated as quickly as possible. They curled up towards the cloud.

He began to slowly walk around the crater. As he moved along its perimeter, the Sak's space scrolled around, opening up in ever different configurations.

One: night in two steps, stars underfoot, loosened earth spiraling to the zenith and back, light falling only from behind and the long shadow cast by Zamoyski's silhouette also spiraling - but why does he see it as a spiral?

Two: a loop so tight that he feels as if he were locked in a sphere with walls of parched African soil, his head is weighing in a different direction than his legs, he must move on as quickly as possible, or he will lose consciousness.

Three: a semicircular lake above his head, in semi-darkness.

Four: a crater all around, the interior has exchanged with the exterior, the Pandemonium falls on Zamoyski in a thousand tense stalks - escape, escape!

Five: back on the plain.

He could go on forever. The number of combinations of elements in each kaleidoscope is astronomical.

The limits are the body and time. The physiology of the organism, which demands energy. The food supply from Zamoyski's and Angelica's saddlebags was not large, the resourceful Miss McPherson had undoubtedly planned regular hunts. She had packed more ammunition than provisions. Zamoyski did not know the model of the rifle Angelica had taken, but it was not a weapon based on any mysterious technology, in fact it was very similar to the good old Winchesters.

"If she could hunt, I can too," Adam told himself. At first it really went well somehow - antelope, bird, bird (he did not recognize the species), wild pig. He counted his activity cycles at over twenty. So a month had passed.

A month passed and Zamoyski the hunter had increasing difficulty in spotting any larger game, no matter how far he ventured into the entrails of the dismembered Sak. He could traverse miles and miles of rippling sea grass—hard, rough to the touch, each blade like a saber—and not come across a single mammal or bird. Of course, he told himself before falling asleep, staring at the sphere of dark or light sky, or whatever happened to be above his head instead of sky.

Of course, I can walk a thousand miles, but I will never get anywhere beyond this same piece of Africa, torn from Earth and locked by kidnappers in a space-time onion stretched across Fangs. How many edible specimens of fauna could there have been here at the time of the kidnapping? After all, there had been no miraculous multiplication!

In the end, he even took scavengers at gunpoint. The idea of entering a -T Zone began to gain in his mind again.

He probably would have finally decided to do so, if he had not seen Angelica suspended in the sky, in damp semi-darkness behind a curtain of water. The curtain separated the third and fourth coils of space on the path 30°/140 — 330°/10 — 90°/340. Angelica fell here in an avalanche of mud, slightly diagonally to Zamoyski's vertical (he stood on the border of light and shadow). A butterfly in a block of brown amber, a terrified girl in a bubble of slowed-down time — suspended in the air in a frozen second, third second after the Sak catastrophe.

I'll go in, catch her, help her. He went in; he had the impression that he was climbing stairs, although he was walking on flat ground (soft, loose, his shoes sank as if into peat). The darkness was getting deeper. Finally, he stood directly under the avalanche — but it (the avalanche, Angelica) was still hanging over his head, not an inch lower. The -T zone did not reach the surface of the earth.

What could he do? Sit down and wait? He looked at her, craning his head until his neck ached. Three-quarters enclosed in a mass of black earth, broken into the shape of an asymmetrical chandelier — so many lumpy arms of a scree stopped in motion — Angelica emerged from the rough darkness like an unfinished sculpture from a block of stone: here an arm, here a foot, here a hip. He could not see her face, apart from a fragment of her forehead smeared with mud and an eye with a panicky eyelid.

Find some suitable -T Zone, check it every few zone hours... I will never, never will forget - that silent terror on the dirty face of the girl stuck in a clay

sky.

He wouldn't forget anyway, because now that he had found the way to Mnemon's Palace, he wouldn't forget anything he didn't want to forget.

The road began at 30°/140 - 150710 - 90°/5. He went through a wide gate of yellow, matt metal and saw a long colonnade driven into the dry soil of Africa, behind it a terrace under a flat roof. The sun was reflected off the smooth surfaces. It wasn't stone, it wasn't metal either. In the middle of the terrace stood a chair, and in fact only this detail glaringly differed from the model image of Zamoyski's Palace. But the resonance of memory had already been aroused, the accidental convergence of images had stimulated the dead paths of associations.

Zamoyski carefully entered between the columns (the Sak was exceptionally knotted here). He sat down in the shade on the cool floor. The bubble of associations grew, rising to the surface of Adam's mind - his head would burst in an instant, his skull would crack with a dull crack. He closed his eyes and surrendered to it, relaxing the muscles of his body and mind.

The Ruins of a Roman villa.

The Ruins of a Roman villa.

The Ruins of a Roman villa. A park.

The Ruins of a Roman villa. A park, the wind moves the trees.

The Ruins of a Roman villa. A park, the wind moving through the trees. A silver pond.

Ruins of a Roman villa. Park, the wind moving the trees. A silver pond, the willows above it. In the pond and above the pond - the moon is two-thirds full, a tarnished plateau. The night is cool, the air is sharp in taste, silence vibrates above the ruins, the park and the pond - the night is like sobering salt.

Zamoyski climbed the gentle slope towards the colonnade and jumped onto the terrace.

The strong smell of wet wood made him dizzy, almost as if he had fallen face

down into the undergrowth of a rainforest. He remembered the forest adjacent to his grandparents' farm. As a child he often went there and in the afternoons and evenings, the colors and smells would put him in a state of malarial half-sleep; children were there constantly, but in that forest...

He shook his head, sneezed.

He looked around the terrace. There were several dozen mahogany tables, organized in a double horseshoe as if on a museum exhibit. The objects lying on the tables had been placed on rectangular tops with such careful geometric proportions that they reminded him of artistic installations, Japanese meditation gardens.

Only one object rested on the table closest to the stairs: a black-and-white photograph in a wooden frame, tilted at such an angle as to reflect the moonlight straight into the eyes of anyone climbing the stairs.

Zamoyski leaned over the counter, but was careful not to touch anything. The photograph showed himself and a man in a black suit, walking along a stone quay. In the background were several-story buildings, historic tenement houses. Adam was in the photograph in a thick, white sweater, the afternoon sun was breaking on the edges of the material into a woolly halo, Adam looked as if he had been retouched onto this quay straight from a postcard heaven of shining angels and fluffy clouds.

He barely looked, and remembered.

Paris, the November before the launch of *Wólszczan*, with Durenne on the Seine, the first lesson.

"Imagine a place, a building."

The Frenchman spoke through his nose and with a slight accent. With his left hand, he constantly reached into the pocket of his jacket, taking out and putting in a handkerchief. Zamoyski was not sure if it was a nervous tic or another of Durenne's mnemonics. Or maybe a cold.

"Let it be unique, so that you wouldn't find two like it in your whole life. You should have some emotional relationship with it, let it be extremely charming or exceptionally repulsive. Imagine it in great detail, from every angle, inside and out."

"I mean, a full 3D simulation" Zamoyski muttered.

He walked on Durenne's right, just a meter from the edge of the sidewalk, behind it the waters of the Seine, muddied by the recent rain, lapped. An archaic barge was passing them, on board which a white-haired old man sat on a high chair and read from a laptop. The air smelled faintly of burning.

"You could say that" Durenne nodded. "A full simulation, a full imagination. It will take you some time. It's important to imagine the smells characteristic of each location."

"Smells?" Zamoyski sniffed. The sour smell of burning was getting stronger in his nostrils – had something burned here? He looked around. No sign of smoke. It stank as if they were walking through a burnt-out area, he couldn't even smell the river. It was very irritating.

"The mnemonics that I teach," Durenne continued (handkerchief taken out and put away), "are not those primitive methods of memorizing texts that Simonides of Ceos and the Greek sophists, Cicero and teachers of orators, or even Giordano Bruno with his 'theatre of memory' were famous for. The *ars memoriae* of our times is already an advanced branch of cognitive science, based on neurological research. This is how we know that, in parallel with images, stored memories should be associated with smells, especially when these memories carry a strong emotional charge. The basic cortex structures responsible for receiving and processing information from the nasal nerves are directly connected to the hippocampus, which governs memories, and also to the amygdala, which controls the experience and expression of emotions. It is also responsible for self-defense reflexes, but more about that later. So..."

Durenne stopped when an elderly woman passing them dropped her umbrella. Adam picked it up; she thanked him. Durenne followed her with a look.

"So imagine the Palace. The image should be permanent, once you decide it, don't change it, don't embellish it, don't make it easier. If you are awakened in the middle of the night, you should be able to walk it in your mind's eye; it doesn't have to have complex architecture."

"And then...?"

"And then you'll be able to add more bricks of memory to the building."

Zamoyski must have grimaced doubtfully then, because when Durenne moved the handkerchief away from his lips, they stretched in an understanding smile.

"Please talk to the participants of the long-term missions, to the volunteers from the isolation experiments. Memory Palaces always turn out to be extremely useful. Apparently, it was Muster's mastery of mnemonics that saved his life on Mars. He was able to recreate the entire route to the base based on the details of the Martian surface collected in the Palace. I don't know, maybe. It's certainly not one of those unnecessary procedures, training for the sake of training. You'll see. Who didn't I train..."

"Who?"

Durenne looked at Zamoyski, blinked, glanced inside the handkerchief, and put it in his pocket.

"Let's say I don't remember."

Zamoyski moved away from the photo. As you can see, *ars memoriae* didn't save his life—but maybe it will save his identity. If my name is not Adam Zamoyski, and if what I remember comes from McPherson's mind doctors...

This Palace also comes from them.

He looked around the terrace immersed in the moonlight. A cool wind blew from the pond, willows rustled over the dark water, and suddenly there was the smell of heather.

He counted the tables occupied: seventeen, including the one with the Parisian photograph.

Of the entire collection, the most striking was a human hand: naked, black, severed above the elbow. He came closer. A left - male. It stank of iron, sweat, and burning.

"We're falling!" Washington yelled. "It's not correcting! Why isn't it correcting!"

They were falling like a stone, the shuttle shook in transverse vibrations, as if it were about to fall apart. They knew that it couldn't fall apart, but the

impression was so overwhelming that they were almost looking for cracks in the walls.

Zamoyski's personal screens were also shaking in all directions; the surface of Narva was hazy on them, the contours of the continents were blurring. (They didn't know the name back then, the word — Narva — had intruded here from other memories of Zamoyski's.)

Everyone was hermetically sealed in their spacesuits — and yet when the seams of the fuselage really did start to give way, they tightened their grips on the clasps of their cocoons.

In the lower layers of the atmosphere they switched to gliding flight, everything calmed down. Immediately, however, Washington began to scream again:

"We'll crash! We'll crash! We'll crash!" (Washington had his own echo in his throat, always giving a loud replay; Zamoyski-in-memory remembered that already).

Indeed, they crashed. The shuttle capsized hard behind A lake, on a plateau. It was thrown twice; it stopped, broken in half — but it wasn't burning, it wasn't burning yet.

Zamoyski was thrown out of the cocoon toward the escape hatch. But there was no escape hatch in that place anymore — Adam banged his helmet against the upper cabinets until it eclipsed him. Smoke was coming from the stern, there was crackling in the headphones, the electronics were blazing with red alarms or — what was more terrifying — remained silent and dark. Only the AI in charge issued categorical commands and almost orders, what to save, what to extinguish first... Zamoyski didn't listen.

Mountclaver and Sok, also shot towards the airlock, reaching for the levers of its manual mechanism. Arcing surges crackled loudly from the pilot's compartment. Zamoyski looked around. Washington was just jumping over the crushed physiological support modules, reaching out to Zamoyski. At the same time, Sok jerked Adam towards the exit - and he only saw the outer edge of the structural rib of the pilot's compartment falling like a guillotine, then jumped out into the terrible brightness of Hakata.

Mountclaver and Juice pulled Zamoyski away from the burning shuttle.

Adam sat down on a rock and took off his helmet. He coughed and spluttered. He couldn't see anything yet, his head was spinning - before his eyes he had only that hand: black skin, tense muscles; although it wasn't naked, but covered with a blue sleeve. But that's how he remembered it.

That's how he remembered it.

Now that he found his way to the Palace, he could visit it whenever he wanted without having to travel the same path of laborious associations every time. Visit the Palace, smell and look at old exhibits — and add new ones.

Angelica's notebook — it was an external memory, easy to lose. (Although, as life proved, so was the internal one.) Prudence dictated making backup copies.

On the empty table he placed a colorfully colored crystal, a multifaceted flower, densely veined with silver and gold. The crystal's sculpture corresponded to the structure of the Sak. Licking it, it tasted like cold, coarse-grained salt.

In fact, however, the crystal was merely a symbol—like everything in the Palace—because a one-dimensional representation would have required the flower to unfold in more than three dimensions. In the Sak, many places "overlapped" one another, spaces interpenetrated, meshed, and rose to infinity in a few cubic meters— an Escherian headache.

The best proof was the Pandemonium crater. Zamoyski insisted on walking around it, but he hadn't anticipated that a full angle here could be more than three hundred and sixty degrees. Adam had made a circle, and yet he hadn't returned to the starting point. A fractional spin, he thought, smiling under his mustache—under his mustache, in his thick Hemingway beard.

So he kept walking—and so he stepped into the +G well. Crushed by murderous gravity, he slid down the slope into Pandemonium. The beast shot out a dozen tentacles at him. He threw himself backwards. The Pandemonium, never ceasing its irregular rotations—a centrifuge of shredded shadow—unfolded behind him in arcs and spirals. He fled in panic, afraid to turn away from them. What he saw was less terrifying.

Out of breath, covered in mud, crushed by supergravity into the damp earth, he finally reached the edge of the crater. Pandemonium had clearly given up: it

jerked back and absorbed all the strings stretched toward the man into itself—all but one, the longest, which snapped in half. Part of the tentacle flew back into the cloud, part of it flew straight at Zamoyski.

It was as if it wanted to stick itself to his face. It slapped his skin, clung to his cheeks, eyelids, lips, pressed itself into his mouth, nostrils, ears. He choked, scratched it with his fingernails. Certain that he would die by suffocation, he swallowed saliva along with blood from his bitten tongue instead of air.

At the last moment, the silver-gray mass gave up. It disappeared from his eyes, from his mouth, from his face. Slusfff!

It was now flapping madly right in front of him. Dry heat was bursting at Zamoyski from the inside of the amorphous monster.

Seven times — he counted to the rhythm of his loudly pounding heart — seven times the monstrosity pupated, turning on its insides and exploding in his face with new shapes, a fleshy Rorschach flower — before it permanently fell into the form of a three-headed bird.

A three-crow, flapping its wings madly, hung in front of Adam, looked into his eyes and squawked inquiringly.

Zamoyski then shot at it, but the bullets did no visible harm to the creature. It also couldn't be lost, it was always faster. Hours and hours, loops and loops, Zones and Zones - the bird didn't leave him more than a meter away.

Zamoyski was driven mad by the thought of that ghost-raven creeping towards his head while he was deep in sleep.

So in desperation he decided to make a second attempt with Pandemonium. He calculated that the Beast gave, the Beast would take. Nothing came of it, the three-raven kept to the other side the whole time, away from the vortex.

Adam even tried to catch it with his bare hands - only to cut his palms.

He cursed the silver bird and cursed it.

The beast was quickly building its dictionary.

"You bloody fart, get the hell out of here, okay? I'll strangle you with my bare hands at last."

The voice was also Zamoyski's, and the intonation, and the rhythm; everything.

The right head spoke; the middle one only hissed maliciously, and the left one was completely silent.

Catch the silver bird, lock them up, tie them up; somehow. Adam wove a net out of grass and branches and threw it over the bird. Shit. The three-crow flew through it like water through a sieve.

That was why Zamoyski was so surprised when Angelica, after waking up, stretched out her hand and the bird politely settled on it with folded wings and lowered beaks.

"What the hell...?"

She looked at Adam questioningly.

He pointed his chin at the Three-crow.

"It listen to you."

"He's big enough to recognize a Stahs on his own."

"What?"

She straightened her back and grimaced. She sat the bird on a branch nearby (Zamoyski had prepared a supply of brushwood). she stretched and stood up. Black dust showered off her and her clothes in dry fountains.

"I have to wash myself."

She moved toward the water curtain, but after a dozen or so steps she stopped and looked back at Adam. He didn't react.

She pursed her lips.

"Mr. Zamoyski," she drew low, "you're very welcome."

He stood up, bowed (his smile was hidden by his beard) and walked outside the perimeter of the spatial loop.

Did I smoke cigarettes? This is the moment to light up; the fingertips trem-

ble, the skin itches. (The body remembers). Without a cigarette in his hand, Zamoyski's gaze wandered along the line of the false horizon. The tusk rotated there around a horizontal axis like a giant spit. The tusk was almost perfectly smooth and the only sign of its movement were slight changes in the intensity of the reflected light. In that -T region of the Sak it reached along rather complicated trajectories, through air lenses and prisms, Zamoyski could see the Sun's rays on the surface of the cone.

When he returned to the fire, Angelica was buttoning up her wet shirt. Kneeling by the fire, she tied her hair at the nape of her neck.

"Where are my things?"

"In the grove. I'll take you. It's not far. Actually... nothing is far here."

"How much time has passed? Your beard."

"Yes. But I don't have any clock I could trust. There are... faults here. You tell me.

She nodded to the bird. It hopped towards me, using its wings to help it keep its balance.

"Okay?" it asked, tilting it head. "Okay?"

"Where did you get it?" she asked Zamoyski.

So he told her about Pandemonium, about his wanderings, about the Sak disaster. Angelica listened patiently, chewing on a snake.

"That's all that's left," Zamoyski commented at the end, when she swallowed the last bite. "Snakes."

"Ahh."

She licked her fingers.

"So?" he said. "What about this bird?"

The three-crow looked at Adam with one head, Angelica with the other, the middle one staring at the fire, the flames jumping in its black eyes, the glass beads.

Angelica measured the bird with her gaze, raised her gaze to Zamoyski. Where did this sudden sadness in her eyes come from, sadness, fatigue, resentment – what should we call that damp shadow? But immediately the girl lifted her chin, withdrew her shoulders – and the impression passed.

"Show me," she snorted, "the Pandemonium."

So dependence returned and anger returned. Humiliated, Zamoyski felt childish gratitude towards Angelica.

"Well then!" he jumped up. "This way! Miss McPherson." With a broad gesture he indicated the direction.

On the way to the crater she did not comment a word on the phenomena she observed. She was certainly aware of the attention with which Zamoyski was watching for any reaction from her.

Nevertheless, she did not even blink and Adam remembered her words about the inevitability of death. Maybe I was really marching next to an emotional zombie? But then he remembered something else, the desperation with which she had cut with the knife. He instinctively scratched the fresh wound on his forearm.

The girl perked up a bit once, when they were passing through a short loop of a metal structure, behind the doors of which opened to a false plain with the Pandemonium crater. Angelica stopped before crossing the threshold and smiled at the ceiling, mumbling something under her breath.

The three-bird sitting on her shoulder repeated it later in her voice, and Zamoyski heard a subtle mockery in it: "Stahs' luxuries."

Standing on the edge of the crater, she looked at the raging Pandemonium below.

"It's quite big," she commented. "Is it getting bigger?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you think?"

"You know... it's hard to tell."

“By the circumference of the hole.”

He frowned.

“Where do you think it gets its building blocks and energy from?” she asked rhetorically. ”They always eat the most on empty functions. Hold this.” She handed Zamoyski the silver-feathered bird.

“What are you up to?”

”I’ll try to format it.”

“What?”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have...” She took a deep breath, thought for a moment. ”Do you remember this De la Roche?”

“Yeah.”

“They are not human.”

“Indeed, you mentioned something.” He rubbed the back of his head reflexively. “So there was finally contact with extraterrestrials. . . ”

“No, no, no” she shook her head. “They are not an Alien; although you certainly met Aliens there. They are a Phoebe, a posthuman being. Which doesn’t mean there aren’t any Alien Phoebes, but—well, you know, the principle is the same. First the phren in natural evolution’s packaging, then Phoebe, then Inclusion—as they arrange themselves on the Curve.”

“What Curve?”

She waved her hands, already impatient with his ignorance.

“Never mind. I told you we can perform one hundred percent accurate mind scans and reconstructions—and that’s what happened to you, too.”

“Don’t remind me,” Zamoyski muttered, grappling with the restless three-crow.

“But imagine the state in between. Then a person exists only as a record on Plateau, a pattern of distortions of its Fields. With the help of an appropriate stage, he can be run there ’dry’. The process of transforming this data in the ap-

propriate environmental program is indistinguishable from biological life. Now, some people consider this way of existence to be, hmm, more attractive. Faster, more complete, giving more possibilities, not intellectually limiting, eliminating the shortcomings of the previous stage. Therefore, they copy their archiving to previously prepared Plateau Fields and after the death of their body do not imprint themselves in new ones. Since they exist in their entirety as a form of Plateau distortions, they are subject to the same laws as all of its 'content'. They can freely expand, divide, copy, program, format, cut and upgrade, design and specialize themselves. De la Roche, who you talked to, this person. . . "

"Hmm?"

"The real Phoebe Maximillian de la Roche only managed it, it was just a local manifestation, limited by the Emperor and the protocol specific to Farstone. Nanoware is subject to the Emperor's direct supervision in Civilization. He has all the supplies of nanomats, inf, and he rents them out for a fee set by the Lodges, now a symbolic amount. This is what the Foundation states."

He just looked.

"The Foundational Agreement!" she snorted in frustration.

A little while longer and Angelica will be no different from a little girl, rolling her eyes and stamping her feet on the spot at stupid adults. Hiding a smile, Zamoyski lowered his head in mock humility.

"What did De la Roche do?" Angelica continued. "I rented some info nanoware and configured it at the gate of Farstone into my manifestation; It is possible that at the same time, in other places in Civilization, in other Ports, they maintained several dozen more manifestations, the Phoebes are always operating in multitasking mode. After the wedding, the link with the nanoware was severed, the NSCC program was deleted and the nanoware returned to the Emperor's control. Many guests were present at the wedding in this way. Also the Stahs of higher Traditions, who did not want to or could not come there in person from more distant Ports. Also Aliens - I saw a few ambassadors. Also Inclusions and seminclusions. Also the Emperor himself. Damn it, the assassination attempt on Judas, the first one, was also carried out with the help of a nanoware manifestation!"

"What assassination?"

"Didn't I tell you? I will. Later. This..." she pointed a straightened finger at the bottom of the crater - is nanoware cut off from the pattern. It is not organized by any program, it has no connection with the Plateau. I suppose the severance occurred during the catastrophe."

"But you said that the Emperor..."

"I didn't say that it was the Emperor's nano."

"But you said that in Civilization..."

"I didn't say that it was the Civilization's nano."

Without another word, without a warning gesture, she turned on her heel and began to descend to the bottom, into the embrace of Pandemonium. Her wet hair shone almost purple, falling down her neck and back. She didn't look back.

Zamoyski looked into the six eyes of the bird pressed to his chest. A nano-matic manifestation. And yet he felt the warmth of its body under his fingers, felt the animal's breath in his hands and the beating of its heart.

He had no idea what to think of all this.

The three-crow stared at him with clinical curiosity, silver heads nodding from side to side, Zamoyski was locked in the holographic gaze of the creature as if in a cage. He spat and put the three-crow under his arm.

The bird flapped its wings.

"He's not human!" it squawked.

In a world of perfect imitation, art is born from the distortions of duplication.

Angelica didn't look back, it's true, but halfway there, in the shadow of a high vortex (in the shadow of a shadow), just before the Beast's opening throat - she almost turned around and escaped from the crater altogether.

Only then did the cataracts leave her mind (all because of Zamoyski!) and Angelica understood that if it wasn't inf, if it wasn't the Emperor's nanomats

- they didn't necessarily have to recognize her as a Stahs. She would enter there, into those millstones of speeding microparticles, a meat grinder with teeth measured in angstroms, and in a split second she would be torn into shreds invisible to the naked eye. The three-crow's behavior did not indicate anything, the bird's nanomats were already subject to - some - organization and its obedience could have its source in higher structures. So she couldn't be sure. Death or life. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

She knew very well, however, that Zamoyski was standing there and watching, standing and watching — and so, between fear and anger, she realized that she would no longer turn back, that she would not escape, that she could not.

Although the fresh memory of the mortal panic, the attack of animal hysteria in the heart-crushing grip of the black hand of the earth — that persistent memory still convinced the organism, whispering directly to the bones, lungs, intestines: turn back, turn back, turn back, every death is real, the body is the body, death is death, turn back, turn back, you will turn back and survive.

She did not turn back, she did not look back, and when the vortex stretched out long tendrils of shadow towards her, she in response extended her hand to them — let them touch her, let them taste her, let them compare her DNA with the pattern, with the first canon of of the inf's self-organization.

The tendril wrapped around her wrist and forearm. Angelica waited for Zamoyski's cry—he should have tried to stop her, threatened and begged her, rushed to help!—but he clearly didn't react at all. Cursing him inwardly, she stepped forward. Let him decide.

She stepped into the shadow—and the shadow parted before her.

She calmly walked through the vortex to the other side of the crater. Passing the eye of the tornado, she let out the air from her lungs (so she was holding her breath after all!). The shadow behind her was splitting in two. She was smiling broadly now—because Zamoyski couldn't see her. She had him behind her, twenty meters horizontally and four meters vertically.

She turned left and, almost running, circled the tornado, tightening her arc. As she ran, she tore off more fragments of the cloud thickening at the edges from the Pandemonium. The torn scraps of the nanomatic elements fluttered in

her hands as if they were alive, combining, dividing, leaking between her fingers and flying away in clouds of mist.

She ran to the edge of the crater.

“Give it here!” she shouted, looking back at Zamoyski.

But she was in a different loop, so she couldn’t see Adam. When she took another step outside, the crater itself and the vortex disappeared from her sight. She forgot about the lacy structure of the Sak - here you have to count every yard and foot.

So she returned by a longer, roundabout route up the slope. Zamoyski was watching her from the opposite side. She was clearly surprised, but he didn’t say anything, didn’t ask, and didn’t even show relief at seeing her alive and whole. He didn’t even look at the storm in her hands.

She thought about how much it must have cost him. She thought, how childish. He’ll play the tough guy here for me. He has no idea what’s going on around him, poor idiot.

But he didn’t look at Angelica’s hand, because he was looking into her eyes. Their gazes met - the poor idiot certainly knew what was going on in her head. He saw that smile of superiority that - it seemed to her - she had suppressed before it even appeared on her face. What did Father Frenete keep saying? *The proud are not able to humiliate us - only the truly humble can do that.*

She lowered her gaze; she didn’t blush often, but she would soon, the blood in her cheeks would burst through the tan, she could feel it.

“Give it to me,” she snapped.

He carefully handed her the three-crow.

She began to add more portions of the nanomatic cake to the silver-feathered crow. It swelled unevenly, faster here, slower there, the victim of a voracious cancer.

“Wh-what?” It squawked, beating its wings so that the wind ruffled its hair; and the wings were now both silver and gold and black and crystal clear. ”Wha-aaat?” The squawking no longer resembled the voices of Angelica or Zamoyski.

She gave Adam the turkey-sized bird, then descended back into the crater. Because she was walking in a spiral, she disappeared from Zamoyski's sight immediately. He sat down on the edge of the caldera, tucking the three-crow back under his arm.

He looked at the lines of the tracks left by Angelica. The crater was not symmetrical. The angle of the slope could be used to determine the strength of the local Zone's G: -G on slopes that were too steep, +G on slopes that were too gentle. The circumference of the crater also seemed to depend on the location of the measurement.

He couldn't understand the physics of the Sak. He tried this way, he tried that way - it still didn't make sense. First of all, why hasn't it killed us yet? Gravitational gradients, which are a consequence of such a modeling of space-time, should prove deadly to all flora and fauna taken into the Sak.

Besides, how is it that I can exit the loop, go through successive 3D1T refractions - but not light, light is enslaved, circulates inside. From a common sense perspective, it should be exactly the opposite. Absurd!

Above all, what in God's name is happening to light here on the border of T Zones?! He had been racking his brain over this since his first adventure with the Zone's distorted time flow, by the grove. Visible light falls within the wavelength range from about 770 to 380 nanometers. So a doubling of acceleration or deceleration should have thrown electromagnetic radiation beyond the wavelengths detected by the human eye—into the ultraviolet or infrared, and beyond. But the Zones in the ripped Sak were much stronger, the shifts several orders of magnitude greater. Looking across the Zone border, I should have seen radio waves and X-rays—not butterflies dancing in columns of light and silver reflections on the surface of streams.

He asked Angelica about this when she appeared with a large octopus of yellow smoke.

The girl snorted, instantly irritated.

"Jesus, I don't know, I'm not good at science."

"Well... you just gave me a lecture on nanotechnology."

"It's customs, not science. Does knowing the rules of the road make you a

specialist in gasoline engines?"

"So you have no idea?"

She shrugged.

"I can only guess. What are the Fangs' first priority? Maintaining comfortable conditions for humans in Ports. These are really strong safeguards. They have to be. Otherwise, who would risk their lives in the permanent bends of space-time? One wrong fold and a Holocaust."

"I find it hard to believe that you agree to such. . . "

"A must is a must. In your times, didn't people didn't fly 'planes'? How many plane crashes have there been? A Fang hasn't had a single one. I know that the Ports' Kraftware protocol guarantees the preservation of a space-time sculpture friendly to Stahs in all circumstances"

"He could really deal with a mangled Sak that way..."

"Kraftware protocol!" Zamoyski snorted. "That you're supposedly programming — what? superstring networks? cosmogenic fields?"

She shrugged.

"And every photon, every particle..." she tapped her forehead expressively.

"What?" she got offended. "A program is a program — bioware, nanoware, Kraftware, it doesn't matter — it will do its thing until the end."

"So that's why you're collecting this nano?"

"Hmm?"

"Because no one is running it, only the programs remain."

She put a finger to her lips.

"Time, she muttered, Słowińki time is not our time. Our minute is their millennium. I don't know if it really was a catastrophe, maybe, but if we have time to discuss it at all, it means that they won't do anything to us anyway, or they have really lost control of the Sak. What can we lose by trying to escape? Nothing. Here, I'll glue this monstrosity on. Ugh, well, at least it's in shape."

She gave Zamoyski a four-winged peacock with a holographic tail. The bird was struggling, Zamoyski almost broke its wings.

"Escape!" he panted. "Either I completely misunderstood your explanation about the Sak, or... How can one escape from a closed bend in space-time?"

The commander doesn't explain - the commander orders. There's no way to argue with authority; an argument you don't know is irrefutable. Father Frenete was right, of course. So it seems I'm not cut out to be a commander.

"You've gotten used to it," she said. "Weeks, months."

"Fuck off."

"Ha! All I know is that - in fear of the Flows - part of the Fangs' program was transferred to their internal processors, independent of Plateau. So these are computers based on the physics of our universe - no superintelligence. Because I'm not saying we'll get away with Inclusions! Even with who knows what nano. But you're not going to lie down and wait until the catastrophe theory is confirmed, that is, until the kidnappers don't intervene, not even to prevent your death by starvation?" She winked at Zamoyski. "Hmm?"

"Why did you suddenly start caring about your hollow?"

"Don't be silly. Life is life, phren is phren."

"Have you had some kind of epiphany in the past few. . . "

"What are you doing, idiot? Catch him! Don't stare, just move your ass! Next time I won't organize so happily. Where did he run off to?"

"There. Wait, I'll. . . "

A pandemonic peacock flashed at them once more atop the crater—a blue rainbow of a tail, a storm of long feathers—then it flattened into two dimensions and disappeared into the invisible gap between sunrays.

They gave chase, Angelica first. She was faster, she got into the loop before Zamoyski, he managed to grab her by the arm before the horizon bent again - the peacock was running above their heads, turned 180°. I'll jump and catch him by the tail, thought Zamoyski. Of course he didn't catch it.

Angelica sped up even more - a moment and he had her in the sky too. Where does this loop end? They ran out to the shore of the night lake, with the sun behind them. Angelica turned left. The peacock skittered into the bright savannah, she threw herself like a pike, at the last moment he stepped aside, she missed. Zamoyski jumped over her while running.

The peacock turned back towards the lake, back into the loop. (Or maybe it's a one-way street?). Zamoyski wanted to cross his path, slipped and fell into the water. Now it was his turn for Angelica to pass.

Nanomat could sense the knots and cracks of the Sak flawlessly, and read the structure of Kraftware without a problem. They ran out into the +G savannah, bent to the ground. The bird was a meter away from Angelica — and in the next second forty meters away. She cursed, gave up. But Zamoyski knew that this was another Zone — he dragged his feet, running on, and immediately the peacock slowed to a snail's pace.

On the other side of the Zone was the earthrise, the earth lifted upwards in black ribbons, returning in an ellipse, along reversed gravity gradients. They coughed in the earth dust.

"Left!" Angelica shouted.

There was another short loop, a -G Zone (Zamoyski had risen three meters before he realized it) — and then they stood on the edge of the Pandemonium crater. The peacock spiraled down into a tornado of shadow.

Angelica threw herself after him diagonally, somersaulted twice, and caught the bird by the tail of light. It screamed, flapped its wings. Zamoyski clenched his fist around its neck and pulled the nanomat up the slope.

"I won't strangle the damn thing!"

They stopped at the edge of the caldera. They were panting heavily, the peacock crushed between them, but they weren't looking at the peacock. Both in the dirt, Zamoyski wet on top of it, both barely catching their breath, Angelica with her ruffled hair almost covering her face, Zamoyski with grass in his beard - but smiling like idiots.

"It's a miracle our spines didn't snap!" she giggled, brushing her hair out of her eyes.

He laughed loudly.

“But for now we’re alive, aren’t we?” He squeezed her arm. “We’re alive!”

I’ll kiss her - he thought.

But because he thought it - it was no longer spontaneous, he gave up.

So Zamoyski sat and watched while Angelica shuttled between the tornado of shadow and the edge of the crater.

Left in Adam’s furnace, the peacock gradually transformed into forms corresponding to the increasing volume of nanomats. Zamoyski was certain, moreover, that the creature’s size did not constitute any real limitation - the manifestation was far from critical density. Nevertheless, it grew: peacock, condor, pterodactyl, wyvern, dragon.

Along with the increase in mass, the construct’s intelligence and knowledge base increased - but not linearly. A clear jump occurred two thirds of the way through the process. The logical structure was established, the connections were configured, and the newborn system gained access to permanent memory.

Zamoyski knew this immediately when the dragon spoke in its own (i.e. dragon’s) voice and said:

“I am Smaug.” (Now he was). “Until I connect with the Complementary Fields, I will operate in emergency mode. I am waiting.”

“Can you connect with the Plateau?” Adam perked up.

“I can’t right now” the dragon said and yawned in frustration (teeth like scythes).

Zamoyski’s energy drained just as quickly.

“Why did you pick me in the first place?” he muttered. ”I’m not a Stahs. Why then? Remember how. . . ”

“I remember everything. It doesn’t matter who the operator is, I don’t recognize the discriminatory laws of Civilization. . . ”

These are definitely not imperial nanomats.

How was Adam supposed to "watch over" the dragon now? He was so big — he: the dragon — that his shape reflected the curvature of the local Sak loop. He cast a shadow over himself.

After completing the last round, Angelica nodded to the dragon and the monster obediently descended to the bottom of the caldera to swallow everything that remained after the spiral of shadow in one gulp.

It seemed obvious that the nanomat had not listened to her because she was a Stahs — and that was not why the vortex had let her through. Did that mean that he would not have harmed Zamoyski as well? That if Zamoyski had given an order just as firmly — Smaug would have obeyed him?

Perhaps Angelica's advantage stemmed from the fact that the girl had not asked herself such questions. Zamoyski eyed her. Astronauts are trained in caution to the level of skilled cowards — What had the Jesuits taught her in that strange monastery on the border between civilization and the wilderness? What virtues do the rich and powerful raise their children with in a world where safety is guaranteed by the very structure of the world?

"It is cut off from the Plateau," said Adam. "You were right."

"Hmm?"

"About the kidnappers losing control of Sak."

She shook her head, patting Smaug's black thigh (she had to raise her hand).

"You can destroy the records of some of his Fields, but you can't block access to Plateau."

"Smaug, make her aware."

"I can't connect" the dragon confirmed, shuddering. "He's sucking me in. I keep trying. No contact."

"Self-diagnosis."

"Everything's okay" Smaug assured. "Only the other side is empty. I have the addresses carved in my bones, but I can't get to the Plateau." He tore a

five-meter-long groove in the crater's slope with a sudden blow of his forepaw, in helpless anger.

They went to the grove, to the savannah strip bent into an asymmetrical horseshoe. Smaug had to crawl after them. Flying, he would squeeze through other gaps in the loops and eventually end up somewhere else. Zamoyski had his hot breath on his back. At one point, he looked back and saw Smaug entering a new loop, weaving himself from a thousand streams straight out of nothingness, out of air, out of light.

Angelica walked around the clearing by the stream, frowning at the almost completely overgrown traces of the camp in the grove. She paused longer at the horse bones. The dragon lay in the stream and followed her with his gaze, large, black eyes turning under moist membranes.

Zamoyski showed Angelica the +T and -T Zones and the place of collapse. He felt like a guide to a dignitary; as a showpiece ex-cosmonaut, he had often performed similar functions. (He remembered performing them — after returning from the *Wolszczan* expedition, from which he had not returned.)

Angelica walked and watched in silence; he watched her. The seven centuries of difference between their birth dates made her somehow older, wiser in his eyes. He waited for the verdict.

"So...?" he said when they returned to the clearing, and Angelica sat down in her seat.

"Exactly how many Fangs did you see?"

"One for sure," he replied and pointed to the countless groves in the "sky": no matter how many Fangs he saw, he would have no way of determining whether they were not from repeated views.

"Yes, indeed. Smaug?"

"Excuse me?"

"Map the entire space here for me as soon as possible."

"While maintaining the manifestation?"

"Can you do it?" she snorted. "As long as you don't lose yourself again."

"I hear and I obey," the dragon rumbled and burst into a thousand, a million, a billion particles, into a gray cloud - the cloud dissolved; it disappeared. Only the surface of the stream churned for a moment as the water returned to the trough, and the stones at the bottom changed color.

"How long will it take him?"

She shrugged.

"That depends on the volume of the Sak."

She tried very hard to show appropriate weariness in her voice. Zamoyski was pushing her into the role of expert, omniscient commander, and she didn't have enough willpower to break out of it, to contradict Adam — even if she really wanted to contradict him. She was acting out this whole performance, following him around the area and looking at mostly meaningless tracks, with an impenetrable face she watched the flight paths of pebbles thrown into the Zones — all the time calculating in her mind not how to get out of here, not how to save herself, but how not to disappoint Zamoyski.

Dear God, I've never had to deal with a free nanoware before, I know as much about the laws of nanomat organization as I do about Saks, just scraps of overheard theories, digressions during lectures in Puermageze. But I won't tell him that.

"How is it that they subordinate me so easily" wondered Father and Zamoyski, digging the bones of their mounts out of the ground with her heel...? A few words, a moment of silence are enough for them. But is it really a form of subordination? They show me trust.

So why don't I object? I could. I could.

But precisely she couldn't. Angelica McPherson.

"I think..." Zamoyski muttered, "that since they kidnapped us... and now this attack, it looks like after Plateau... I remember what you said about the message from the Time Well. Doesn't that mean that the war has already broken out?"

The dragon fell like a stone, braking at the last moment against the laws of aerodynamics. They shielded themselves from the clouds of raised dust.

“Done,” said Smaug.

Angelica sat up, shaking the sand out of her hair.

“Did you enter any habitats?”

“No.”

“That structure we passed through at the beginning? It certainly wasn’t taken from Africa.”

“There are more of these things here, by the way,” Zamoyski interrupted. ”They can’t have come from the wild savannah.”

“That’s true,” Smaug admitted. “What’s the question?”

“Have you come across any Sak control installations, Fangs,” Angelica recited, “material communication interfaces, plateau and subplateau, anything that could serve such a function?”

“No.”

So her plan is gone. She had hoped that Smaug’s network of nanomats would also reach the constructs intended for the kidnappers themselves. However, hope had been slim from the beginning. First of all, everything is always made from the Plateau; why drag physical manifestations, some material operators, into the Port? If the kidnappers wanted to appear in person, they had taken that stock of nanoware for that purpose. With the right programs, it would also serve perfectly to drain the minds of Angelica and Zamoyski. So all the more reason not to need any habitats or controllers. Secondly, that outer layer, the Port “level above”, where the Fangs were located, maintaining both the Port with Africa and the Sak itself - was clearly very small, most likely containing nothing but the Fangs, because after the catastrophe and the “rupture” of the inner Port, there was no noticeable drop in air density. Even if they locked themselves in the Port Plus with atmosphere - how much would it cost them to pump it? Those metal tunnels, gates, that colonnade - garbage previously seized in the Sak.

Well, Angelica was grasping at straws and the razor cut off her fingers.

Now she was silent, not wanting to show her confusion with incoherent qu-

estions.

Of course, nothing like that embarrassed Zamoyski - one could not be more confused than he was.

“Ah, hmm, did you see anything interesting?”

“Define ’interesting,’” Smaug grumbled, settling back into the streambed.

“Damn it, I don’t know,” Zamoyski was irritated. ”If I knew, I could name it. Show some intuition, you monster of supertechnology!”

“Intuition, interference.” Smaug grinned a crocodile smile, then raised his left wing, unfurling a dark membrane into a dozen or so square meters.

“Maybe this?” he hissed and displayed on his wing a blurry image of a naked male child, suspended in the air in a diving pose, against the background of a white-yellow wall of fire. The boy could have been five or six years old; his skin was the color of honey, as if already singed, smoked.

“This is running in real time?” Zamoyski confirmed, approaching the wing. After a moment, Angelica followed him.

”Yes” Smaug confirmed.

“He’s slowed down a lot, the Zone is strong.”

“Take us” Angelica ordered.

He took them. Since they couldn’t move the way the dispersed nanoware spread across Sak, Smaug chose a long and tiring route for them. They walked through areas completely immersed in darkness. They relied on Smaug not to fall into any dangerous Zones. Despite everything, Zamoyski tried to remember the way, present all the time in the Roman villa of his Memory Palace, leaning over the crystal warm from his breath.

The dragon threw them through the air, allowing passage high above the ground. Only now did it become clear how primitive Zamoyski’s cartography was. He no longer used the notebook at all, though he did not return it to Angelica. But he had the crystal.

Finally, they had to go underground; they squeezed through like moles, pu-

shing after Smaug into stinking darkness. Four meters below the surface of the ground, the directions reversed. Zamoyski was the first to get through, once again covered from head to toe in mud.

He went out, sat down, took a breath - and saw the child in amber fire. Suspended in the air, he was in the process of falling onto dry sandstone, just before a row of burning trees. The rest of the forest had burned down long ago, new plants were already sprouting on the ashes. Only in this Zone, a high bubble of warped space-time, the fire was still raging and the boy was still falling.

The flames, frozen in their dance, looked like a melting wall of glass. How strong this Zone must have been, since the eye could not detect the slightest change in the image for a good minute! Is it possible to get inside it? How sharp are its boundaries?

Angelica, in turn, clambered out of the ground. Deathly pale, she immediately folded her arms across her chest to hide her trembling; Zamoyski, however, had managed to notice them. She noticed that he had noticed. She walked quickly around the Zone, disappearing from his sight for a moment.

Smaug flew above, the wind he stirred up cooling Adam's sweaty face. And above the dragon, instead of sky, there was only a blue lake, sunlit water from horizon to horizon.

Zamoyski approached the bubble of fire.

"A child."

"Well, I don't know." McPherson walked around the Zone a second time. "Check him out" she said to Smaug.

"It'll take time" the dragon said, descending.

"How long?"

"I don't know yet. A few hours of your time, Stahs."

"You suspect that — what?..." Zamoyski, frowning, turned to Angelica. "That he's not a Stahs? Do you want to compare the DNA?"

"Definitely not a Stahs" she said. "I suspect, however, that he's not a human."

“So who?”

“Someone’s biological manifestation.” She shrugged. ”Phoebe, Inclusion. I don’t know?”

She lay down on the ground, put her hands under her head.

“We’ll wait” she mumbled, staring at the steadily rippling water slope.

Zamoyski walked up to the very edge of the Zone (until he felt a tingling in his foot, which was pushed forward).

“Not a Stahs” he repeated.

“You see what kind of skin he has. It goes against all Traditions.”

The dragon landed on the ruins. He ran to the fire, wagging his tail.

“I have memories that match the image of his body” he said.

Oh? What kind?”

“Disjointed” the nanomat laughed loudly. “Movement, darkness, hard logical structures. Internal memory is a function of the nanoware configuration; once lost in chaos, it is lost forever. If I were to disintegrate into basic modules after being cut off from the Plateau, I would only remember what is engraved in my bones, built into the self-organization procedures.”

Zamoyski, listening to Smaug, still had the impression that the nanomat’s words did not reach him in the vibrations of the air, but directly to his mind — so improbable, almost fairy-tale-like did the sight of a black reptile the size of a TIR truck speaking with a human voice seem to him. As if Disney was allowed access to the secret machinery of the universe—grotesque? horror? kitsch? Adam continued to blink in amazement.

He sat down on his heels at Angelica’s head.

“Listen, why these tests, just tell him to reach inside and take out that puppy. Who is it in there?”

McPherson covered her eyes with her hand, as if Zamoyski’s gaze were burning her, not the sun reflected off the blue waves.

"That's the thing, we don't know who it is. What if it's a Phoebe's nanomatic dummy? We're assuming they didn't take some kid from Puermagaze with us, so it's not a victim."

"I don't understand." He glanced back at the bubble of fire. "A child. What's going on here?"

"You're looking at one of the kidnappers." Then she raised her hand and pointed at Smaug. "Those are his nanomats. We just happened to configure them for our own use." It wouldn't be the most sensible thing to squeeze them into an isolated Zone in large numbers so that he could take them over and turn them against us.

"I don't know what's sensible anymore," he snorted.

"Don't pretend," she smiled ironically. "You're having fun with this."

He looked at her with horror. Fun! Exactly! Well, maybe at first, back in Africa... it had been exciting after all. But now?

Fun...!

He got up and moved forward. The loop was exceptionally wide, he needed almost a kilometer to enter another loop. He was looking for a river, a lake, he had to bathe, wash off this mud. On the way, he carved a route pattern in the crystal (the willows rustled soothingly).

In the end, he almost fell into the cold waves. He had to retreat and undress a step before the boundary of the landscape reorganization. Here he folded his clothes and jumped headfirst into the thorny bushes and rocks. The green water closed over him. He emerged, snorting.

A strong wind was blowing and, floating on its surface, Adam let himself be tossed up and down by the water. He relaxed his muscles and closed his eyes. Now, through his eyelashes, he could see the curved plain above him more clearly; it did not blind him. It even seemed to him that he could see the pitch-black doughnut of Smaug and the warm jewel that had been caught in the fire.

A wind was also blowing from the pond by the ruins of the villa, also cold. The night swayed to the rhythm of its gusts. Zamoyski thought of a chair and

sat down comfortably. Within reach of his hand was a table with Mitchell's pipe. The sharp smell of tobacco pierced his nostrils. Mitchell had smashed it against the table during a conference on board the *Wolszczan* after his second emergency awakening.

"I-don't-agree!" he banged the head of his pipe against the table. "We've been kidnapped!"

(Oh, so that's how associations run! "Kidnapping" - "kidnapping" - "pipe").

"So what?" Washington snorted. "Are you going to wait for a ransom demand?"

"Complete silence from the very beginning," Sok added. "Here, and during the flight, or whatever it was..."

It lasted so long that they had to lie down again in the medical sarcophagi. The first emergency awakening occurred when they left the area of the phenomenon - how many years ago...?

"You're not blind!" Mitchell fumed. "Nothing here is natural! Not even the sun. That star... Does anyone have any idea what's happening to it?"

The star, nominated by the computer dictionary as Hakata, walked diagonally across the dim screens of the *Wolszczan*. They guessed that its spindle-like shape was somehow correlated with its incredibly fast rotation - but if it were a natural effect, centrifugal forces should have caused the opposite deformation. As a result of the Doppler shift of the electromagnetic spectrum lines, Hakata's equatorial chromosphere had a different color on opposite sides; it was this effect that brought them to this system when, spat out into the interstellar void, they had to decide where to turn - Hakata promised intelligent life, perhaps the creators of the Eridani Sinkhole. Was it a coincidence that the *Wolszczan* had been pushed in this direction, less than a light-year from its system? Hakata was tempting, but also - Hakata was terrifying. The star, maintaining itself in such an unstable state, violated the laws of physics.

So what were they to say about the planet below...?

Besides, Zamoyski wondered in his memory, what does "artificial" mean when talking about objects on an astronomical scale...?

"But that's exactly the point...!" Washington thundered. "How can we possibly expect to understand their motives when we don't even understand their methods?"

"You're ruining our argument," Finch pointed out. "He'll now claim that we shouldn't assume that bringing us by force from thirty units into a planet's orbit automatically means an invitation to visit its surface."

"Exactly!"

"I don't understand what you're counting on," Zamoyski chimed in. "Because it's not instructions from Earth, is it? How much is that, Sok? Four thousand?"

"Almost four and a half. This here," she pointed to the galaxy map, "is the core."

"I hate that."

"What?"

"When you tap the screen with your fingernail. It always sends shivers down my spine."

"You haven't heard me drag it across glass yet. . . "

At that point, Mitchell, finally snapped out of it, slammed his pipe on the table and split it in two.

"Biological, broken DNA" Angelica declared, standing on the border of the Zone, her back turned to the approaching Zamoyski. "We'll have to go in and pull him out."

"What...?"

"He'll answer a few questions. As long as the Plateau blockade lasts."

Zamoyski walked around the fiery gem once more, glancing back at Smaug, who was currently simulating a dragon's sleep (the nanomat was blowing steam from its nostrils).

"Both of us? One won't be enough?"

“So one of us would have to stay here for who knows how long anyway.”

“you wouldn’t starve, the beast will surely find some digestible provisions...”

“So, are you volunteering?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Sure, I’ll manage, after all, he’s a kid physically.”

“Volunteer to wait.”

“Oh. Fuck you. Well, maybe he’d be better off?”

“Smaug? What then, are we both waiting?”

Eventually they jumped in together.

In the case of an equally strong +T Zone, it would have been impossible to enter it at the same time; Zamoyski would have seen the difference with his own eyes. Angelica was suspended in the air behind him. However, it was the other way around, the difference in subjective fractions of seconds, which were determined by, for example, the angle at which they approached the edge of the bubble, was instantly eliminated inside. But despite everything, someone had to be first, and it was Adam.

A monstrous heat burst into his face, a wall of fire attacked with a blinding roar. He caught the boy rising from the ground, grabbed him by the arms, lifted him up. The child was screaming something, which Zamoyski could only tell by the movement of his lips; the flames were louder. The little one was writhing and thrashing. Angelica grabbed him by the legs. They rushed back, as far away from the fire as possible.

Again that physiological shock, as they crossed the border, dead flesh, blood boiling in veins, a faint lightness of the head, disobedient, wooden limbs. They fell over. The child kicked Angelica in the temple, jumped up on all fours. Zamoyski pressed him to the ground.

“Stop struggling!”

They were lying in waist-high grass, which now covered the entire area except for those dozen or so square meters of fire that had solidified into gleaming glass and the ground on which Smaug lay motionless. A storm was raging in the sky, great waves were breaking in foaming billows, so much less light leaked into the

savannah. It was twilight without sun and without horizon.

Angelica jerked the boy to his feet.

“I’m waiting for thunder” she growled, ”Well? Crush us!”

The child looked at her furiously, but said nothing; he didn’t try to break away either.

Getting up, Zamoyski saw Angelica from below, as she leaned over the boy. The manner of her body, the mask of her face, even the intonation of her voice, deliberately rough - all of this was almost identical to Judas’; and Adam remembered McPherson well from the TranxPol negotiations and the wedding. It was hard for him to overcome the impression that he was watching the implementation of the same algorithm here - the same algorithm in different hardware, in a different manifestation, a different body.

Angelica’s sunburnt face now reflected the thoughts and feelings of a cold despot. Despite this, the face was young, beautiful - but the contrast with the icon of “Sleeping Angelica” burned into Zamoyski’s memory was overwhelming.

The number of souls is finite not because God will not produce any more, but because the number of original souls is finite - only copies are created afterwards.

“So,” Angelica pulled the boy further away from the Zone. “Who are you? Phoebe?”

The boy shrugged.

She yanked his hair, causing him to stand on his toes with a shriek.

“Any doubts?” she hissed. “We’re all cut off here.”

“A Phoebe’s avatar,” the kid groaned. “I’ve been formatted, formatted, I don’t know anything!”

“If you didn’t know anything, you couldn’t be useful, you wouldn’t have sent yourself here. You know enough to be able to fulfill your mission. What is it?”

“Ouch! To drain you!”

“Both of us?”

"Yes! Him especially."

"It can be done with Plateau. Why this permanent manifestation?"

"Time was of the essence. The plan was to sub-localize the Saks's inner node and drain all the information from you before anyone even realized the kidnapping. I was supposed to react independently. Timed movements around Plateau HS would draw the Emperor's attention."

He's spilled the beans, Zamoyski thought. He's a Phoebe from the Civilization of Man.

"What a plan, and the execution? You haven't drained us after all."

"Because news of the Deformant attack spread through the Fields and you've gained value as bargaining chips."

"We're both archived."

"Models of the decision-makers' phren were made. Emotional factor. You have value. All the more so in the context of the news from the Well."

"Who made them? Those models."

"I've cut that out of my memory."

"Who made them?"

"I don't knooooow!"

"We'll get back to that. What Deformant attack?"

"Seven hundred thousand Fangs. They tore apart Lara-Port, Tau-Port, Wolfe-Port, Syriusz-Port and several hundred private ones."

Zamoyski saw that this news had made an impression on Angelica. Nothing in her face, nothing in her voice - and yet he saw the girl turn her gaze inward for a brief moment, take a step back from herself.

She returned even more determined.

"Why? Why, talk! What did they announce?"

"Ow! Retaliatory action. A breach of custom."

"What did the Lodge say to that?"

"They delayed until an agreement was reached with the other Civilizations."

"Who were the Deformants?"

"It's hard to say, but probably most of the open trade structures."

"The Lodge wanted permission to kill their renegades."

"No. An active alliance."

"Talk."

"The Deformants have also attacked the Ears; at least I've heard about them. Let me go already!"

"Hush. A bargaining chip. What does Judas say to that?"

"I don't know. Really! Maybe we didn't let ourselves know, or maybe we didn't have time. The Deformant devoured Sol-Port. They couldn't swallow it, they had to withdraw the Fangs. But they're closing all the tridents that are leaving. They caught us too."

"The Deformants wrapped us up?!"

"Ahh. But the direct threat to Sol-Port was already at a critical state for the Lodge and it opened two Wars. I don't know anything more, they definitely tried to recapture us — I don't know, I don't know, they blocked the Plateau."

"They blocked the Plateau, you say."

"You see for yourself."

"How does the Sak move in outer space?"

"There's always a knot attachment, a power outlet. A hook. It could even be a grain of sand."

"How did that grain of sand leave Sol-Port?"

"In a rented trident."

“Rented by whom?”

“By me, I think.”

”Don’t tell me you believe it was your original initiative. Where did you get the tip about him?” she pointed at Zamoyski.

“I’ll cut it out, I’ll cut it out!”

I would have cut it out myself” Angelica muttered. ”When did it get so messed up here? During the Deformants’ attack, or the Wars’ counterattack?”

”The Wars.”

”If it weren’t for the Plateau blockade, you would certainly be in touch with each other, if only to send files from our memory drain. You know the addresses. What Fields are these?”

“I...”

”What Fields are these?”

The boy waved his hands, tears flowing from his eyes. Angelica was lifting him by the hair. Maybe they were in a light -G Zone, or maybe the girl was that strong. Zamoyski saw her pursed lips, her furrowed eyebrows, and he understood that he was witnessing a formatting of McPherson’s personality that was perhaps more severe than the one their kidnapper had subjected his manifestation to.

Adam once believed that it was impossible to consciously direct the evolution of one’s own mind, to order oneself to think or not to think about a given thing or in a given way; that it was part of it, that man was a product of biological determinants and environmental influences, and what’s more - feedback loops, mostly extinguishing, the final effect of which could not be predicted. Once he would have given his hand for that. Doctor Durenne cured him of this belief.

But was Angelica aware of what she was doing? She listened to the child’s manifestation, freely inflicting pain on it and frightening it with greater ones, very natural in her cruelty. It caused Adam great distress, but he could not look away; he did not want to look away.

”Alone?” she continued.

“Yes.”

“And these nanomats?”

“For the guests.”

“For convenience for the torturer?”

“Why? For those few hours?”

“I saw elements of artificial structures screwed into this labyrinth, they don’t come from Africa. The bottom of the pool. Corridors made of micromaterial joints.”

“Not mine. Probably the Deformants. Or that trident.”

“Exactly! The Wars wouldn’t have krafted us like that, Port by Port, we wouldn’t have survived that at the very least.”

“How should I know?” the little one complained tearfully. ”I’ve been cut off from Plateau, I don’t even know where we are.”

“Near Sol-Port.”

“We were there before the Wars attacked. But now? Without an a-time clock I don’t even know the probable radius of the shift. Because when the warning came. . . ”

“What warning?”

“About the Plateau blockade. That within a few dozen light years one of the Wars will cut off the Deformants from their Plateau like this.”

“At least from this it follows that we haven’t left that area yet...”

“Well? Already?” The honey-colored boy was jumping on his toes. ”What more can I tell you?”

“Have you forgotten? The addresses of the Transfer Fields.”

And she knocked the boy to his knees, stomped on his feet, took a scarf from her trouser pocket, and tied his hands with it. He was thrashing around like a trout on the shore.

“Smaug!” she shouted.

The dragon raised its head.

“Fire, a constant source” she ordered. ”And some, um... shackles.”

The dragon struck with its tail from above its back, like a scorpion, punching a hole in the ground two feet in diameter. It vomited out volcanic heat from there.

As for the stocks, he tore them out from his side, a pair of iron clamps with a regular circumference. He threw them at Angelica with his hind paw.

While she was shackling the demon boy’s legs, Zamoyski approached and quietly asked:

“What are you doing?”

“I have to get those contacts out of him,” she mumbled, not interrupting.

“What are you doing?” he repeated dully.

“He’s locked in his body and there’s probably no neural blockage. A quick burn should be enough. Right, kid? That’s enough, that’s enough.”

The boy stopped struggling now. He was looking at the sea above him, his eyes big, blue, glazed with tears.

Zamoyski pulled Angelica behind the Zone.

“What do you need them for, exactly?”

“Hmm?”

“These addresses.”

“They’re the only clue to the kidnappers.”

“But worthless to us anyway.”

“Who knows?”

She smiled, brushed her hair away from her face. The gesture was the same as in Farstone, in the wedding tent, in front of Zamoyski’s cell in Puermageze.

Adam was shaken by disgust.

“What’s this, we’re not sentenced to annulment anymore?” he growled.

“A lucky coincidence, see? We got out of their control, the whole Sak got out. Now we just have to let Civilization know”

“You’re welcome to try it.”

“True, we’re under this War blockade.” She pondered. “If we could somehow get to the Fangs’ programs...”

“So what?”

“They’d take us out from under the Plateau blockade.”

“We are in a Sak.”

“I meant the external Fangs, the ones from a trident carrying the Hook. Besides, it doesn’t matter, they have to be coupled together; just to get into their program. The bastard has to know these addresses, too.” She looked back through the fire at the prisoner.

Zamoyski clenched his teeth in helpless anger.

He wanted to shake her, but she wiggled out of his hands.

Now she was looking at him with open suspicion.

“Think about it” he pressed. “This is a vicious circle! You won’t be able to control the Fangs until we get out of the blockade, and we won’t get out of the blockade until you get into their programs. You say that everything goes through Plateau. So even if he sang you a hundred addresses here — it won’t do any good! How will you even verify his words without access to Plateau? This all makes no sense.”

“Hmm, that’s a problem, indeed.” She stretched, straightening her arms above her head, winked at Zamoyski. “But you don’t have to give up right away, there’s always some hope. Remember? You got me out of the grave.”

She went to burn the boy’s feet.

An absurd situation, thought Zamoyski. Pure surrealism, someone had swit-

ched the script of the drama.

He returned to the dragon.

"Listen, what exactly is this blockade of the Plateau?"

"I don't know" replied Smaug. He didn't even open his mouth, he was mumbling from deep in his chest.

"There must be some theoretical description. What are the possibilities?"

"There aren't any. You can't put any isolator between the Plateau and the receiver, because the location of the receiver doesn't matter: from any point on the Plateau it is equally close to any point of any other Inclusion."

"I know that, she told me. But you admit that this blockade exists."

"Yes."

"So?"

"These are the Wars."

"What do you mean Wars?"

"They can."

"Who is that?"

"Only the Grand Lodge knows the reports. Gnosis censors it."

"What reports? What are these Wars, exactly?"

"They are crafted in vast Ports in accelerated Slowinski time. For hundreds of millions of Port-years they do nothing but perfect methods of destruction, waging constant war there, everyone against everyone; thus they evolve into areas of technology otherwise unattainable. No War has ever been released outside the Port of the Second War or the proving ground. Many are bred; I don't know how many. Other Civilizations breed them too; certainly the Husks and the Antari. A large percentage die out spontaneously. They are set against each other and interbred. That's a whole science. Morteugenics engineers report only to the Grand Lodge. Since there may be a danger of contamination with technology here, everything then goes through Gnosis censorship. So they can know. But

no one else. I know that blocking the Plateau is impossible."

Adam sat down hard. Washed by the waves of Smaug's low voice, he almost didn't hear the screams of the tortured manifestation. Angelica, on the other hand, must have asked very quietly, because he didn't hear her at all.

Angelica. She's in shock, after all, it's a miracle that she's survived death, these are surely just symptoms of this stifled hysteria...

He looked up, at the sea. It had calmed down, the azure depths reflected the bright sun (itself still invisible). Run away from here, don't look, don't hear, immerse yourself in the cool, clean water...

He returned to the girl.

"Leave them. I know how to get out of the blockade. Come on. You'll tell daddy and this safari will be over."

The kid stopped screaming immediately, as if someone had lifted the needle of a gramophone. Angelica pushed his feet away from the fire, wincing at the stench of burning flesh.

"Impossible," she gasped, catching her breath. She looked up at Zamoyski. "How?"

"I don't know anything about the Plateau," he said. "But I know that if you see something here," he swept his hand around the inside of the loop, "you can get there too, and we saw the Fang, right?"

She blinked, bit her lip.

"Yes. You're right. I didn't think about it."

"Let's go then."

She looked back at the boy with the burnt legs.

"What?" Zamoyski urged her.

"The moment we get out of the blockade," she muttered, "he'll be back in his Plateau Fields in the same second. They'll regain control and crush us."

"Not true!" the little boy denied hotly.

“True, true,” Angelica repeated, looking around the area.

She took a few steps back and picked something up from the tall grass. She turned and fired from the hip. The shotgun cracked dryly, throwing the boy at Zamoyski’s feet. Adam jumped back. She fired a second time; that’s how hunters finish off prey. The kid fell on his face and froze. Whatever was leaking out of him, the greedy earth swallowed it without a trace.

McPherson glanced at Zamoyski.

“You look like you’ve had anaphylactic shock.”

She nodded at Smaug.

“That Fang. Lead the way.”

The dragon got up and trudged across the savannah; they followed. Angelica slung the rifle over her shoulder.

Adam kept a step and a half behind. She turned her head.

“Give me an alternative instead of making faces like that.”

“Even if I did,” he drawled, “it wouldn’t matter now; you killed him before you asked.”

“But there was no alternative. No. Now. It’s just a cerebrized effigy of some Phoebe or Inclusion - they won’t even remember it.”

“You’re talking nonsense. That was your instinct.”

She shrugged.

Standing over the table with the crystal, he checked the return path. The dragon took an even shorter route. They squeezed through some very tight +G loop, entirely inside the metal structure - and emerged onto the African plain under a purple sky with the Fang hanging from it. The sun was in two places on the horizon at the same time, higher and lower - the shadows spread out like the hands of a clock, smaller with larger, a double gnomon.

Zamoyski remembered that previously on the smooth surface of the Fang (and it was now rotating two hands above the horizon, the eye was lost in

assessing the distance and size of the object) he had seen three reflections of the Sun - but then he had been looking from a different place.

“Does it fit in this loop?” Angelica asked Smaug.

“No, but it’s the closest from here.”

“You count on the surface.”

“Yes.”

“Directly?”

“Should I take you there?”

”Yes.”

This time they walked longer, the loop was extensive, and they also had to bypass vast areas of Zones. They were not heading towards the Fang - its image in the sky - but at an angle of about thirty degrees. They traversed a loop of devastated landscape, the misaligned gravity had turned the area upside down here, it was like walking on a fresh grave of a thousand-year-old forest. They could no longer see the Fang at all. The dragon was almost running, helping itself with its wings from time to time. Angelica had no problem getting into the rhythm of a fast march—and, to his surprise, so did Zamoyski.

They stopped in a place that didn’t stand out. Adam, catching his breath, raised his head. The sky—now (here) ash-gray—was empty.

Smaug aimed his black claw straight at the zenith.

“Four thousand eight hundred and five meters,” he boomed.

They both looked up.

“We need a ladder to heaven,” McPherson muttered. “And an express one at that.”

Zamoyski lowered his gaze to Smaug.

She raised an eyebrow. “Do you think...?”

“If he has enough space... What does the topology of a loop look like at such

heights? I thought it closed more or less spherically."

"I doubt they cut out five kilometers of Earth's atmosphere. On the other hand, we don't breathe a vacuum, the pressure is normal. Perhaps just a few loops along the way..."

"Smaug?"

"The easiest way?" the dragon buzzed. "A hydrogen balloon. First electrolysis. Mara start?

"Why don't you just take us on your back or, well, grab us with your claws somehow... What? Why not?"

Smaug turned his head towards Angelica.

"If you want to risk it, Stahs..."

McPherson once again raised her head, squinted, as if she could actually see something in the monochromatic gray — there, five kilometers up.

"No, better not."

"Should I start?"

"Please."

Zamoyski, not really knowing what to expect from the beast, took a dozen or so steps back. But the dragon seemed to remain motionless. He lay on his stomach, paws under his head, wings on his body, and only blew steam out of his snout.

In the end, the nanomat took over two hours; they had no watches, the sun did not move across the sky, Adam was forced to rely on his body's clock, how many hours were measured by the twisting of the intestines and the pangs of hunger. Then Smaug was dead. Zamoyski was convinced of this when, worried by the nanomat's prolonged silence, he finally stood up, approached, touched - and the reptile disintegrated under his fingers into a cloud of dust that bit the throat and stung the eyes.

Zamoyski coughed. Angelica did not even look - she had been lying on her back the whole time with her hands under her head, consistently ignoring Adam

from the beginning. The ground around them had quickly begun to change color, cracks, bulges, sinkholes appeared, someone was ploughing the hard soil of the savannah “from below”; someone - Smaug. Adam tried to question the dragon then, then the dragon fell silent; they were silent in unison, stretched out on the boiling earth in a single row: a girl, a resurrected man, and a monster. A faint wind stirred the lonely blades of grass.

But what did Zamoyski discover then is that silence didn’t embarrass him. A rarity, a great rarity, especially when you’re silent with a person of the opposite sex, there’s always an undertone. In the meantime, no; complete psychological comfort. Even though he still saw in her face every time the reflection of that moment when she pulled the trigger. He wasn’t sure what she felt: disgust or fascination?

If she weren’t so young, if she weren’t so obviously alien - from a foreign world, from foreign times - he could at least embrace her with some specific feeling, hatred, contempt, disgust, anything. In the meantime - just emotional epilepsy.

She spoke when he returned from Smaug, who had turned to dust:

“I’m not entirely sure how he’ll play this, but... you’d better sit down in your seat.”

Only now did he notice that, the earth had a different, lighter color in the place from which he had risen. It was ss if he had imprinted the negative of his shadow in it. He touched it. Something like mold, soft, moist.

“Sit down.”

He sat down, laid down.

“Couldn’t he maintain his manifestation at the same time?”

“Jesus, nanoware without a hard threshold of mass gain...? Nobody’s that crazy!” Angelica muttered.

Zamoyski’s back and legs began to itch. He wanted to scratch himself — and discovered that he had trouble raising and bending his arm, the mold had quickly grown into the material of his shirt. Shirt, pants, shoes — he checked his limbs one by one — it even intertwined with his hair, after a dozen or so

seconds he couldn't lift his head.

"Angelica..."

"Hmm?"

"It seems I've put down roots."

"Don't struggle, it was supposed to be risk-free..."

Here came a crash, it seemed to Zamoyski that the entire Sak trembled and the ashen sky tilted on the hinges of the firmament. A foul-smelling steam began to rise from the ground.

"...so he has to put seat belts on us, right?"

Crucifixion combined with digestion and burial alive, thought Zamoyski.

"When they talked about the balloon" he sighed, squinting from side to side "I don't know why I imagined a spherical shell and a gondola underneath, us in that gondola... A balloon, right?"

"Maybe you'd better stop talking, it'll cut the moorings and you'll bite your tongue off..."

The ground kicked him in the back and head and he lost consciousness for a moment. The roar of the wind woke him up, the air pressed against his face, preventing him from opening his eyes. His body (the body he remembers) convinced him of the great overload, the blood flowed down, the muscles fainted, the brain was drowning in cotton wool. Until at one point Zamoyski thought: who's piloting? Washington? Only then did the reflection come, the spirit of Smaug.

Slowly the bricks were removed from his chest, but the wind was still sealing his eyelids. Zamoyski began to count his heartbeats, made a mistake after twelve, and started again; his heart was beating irregularly, thrown out of rhythm by the changes in gravity.

Lighter, lighter, lighter, until — thud! — he fell face down onto something hard and lost his breath. Earlier, the bottom and the top had reoriented themselves, earlier something had dug its bony fingers into Zamoyski's thighs and arms — not the soft bonds of mold, but iron shackles. He could not move again,

but the difference was that now he was lying on his stomach.

However, he could open his eyes.

A silver-feathered three-raven toddled up to him along the gentle curve of Fang.

"Easy," he squawked. "Slowly." (The other heads nodded.)

The poisonous purple of the sky surrounded them, sliding in a parabola to the right. Adam, stuck to Fang by a web of mud like a fly stuck to a resinous tree trunk, was turning his back toward a five-and-a-half-kilometer abyss.

II

A different set of conditions defines each unique environment. If the environment changes, its Perfect Form changes. Perfect Form uses the environmental conditions to the maximum extent and conquers and displaces all other forms.

Environments are contained within themselves, from those defined by specific conditions to those defined by the most general conditions.

For a given environment, there is only one Perfect Form. The Perfect Form of an environment based on more general conditions conquers and displaces the Perfect Form of an environment based on more specific conditions.

In a given environment, any change in the Perfect Form means degeneration.

Plateau

UI (ULTIMATE INCLUSION), ULTIMATE INCLUSION

In a broader sense it's an Inclusion with a combination of physical constants that guarantees the effectiveness of a logical construct placed in the Inclusion greater than the effectiveness of constructs from all other possible Inclusions, and all other combinations of physical constants.

In a narrower sense it is a construct placed inside the Ultimate Inclusion (a logical Inclusion).

UC (ULTIMATE COMPUTER), ULTIMATE COMPUTER

The most effective logical construct (on any negentropians) that can be created based on a given combination of physical constants.

SI (SEMI-INCLUSION), SEMINCLUSION

A logical inclusion with limitations that prevent it from developing phren.

TRANS
The minimum amount of energy/matter required to transfer between two Inclusions.

↳The cost of a given Trans is determined by equations involving the physical constants of both Inclusions; this cost is expressible only in units of the source Inclusion.

PLATEAU
Any inclusion from such a point on the Thievi Chart so that: (a) its Trans cost coordinate is minimal; (b) its time coordinate is maximal (Słowiński Time).

The most effective Plateaus fall within much narrower ranges.

↳Colloquially it is a graphical representation on the Remy Chart of potential phrenes corresponding to these points — hence the name.

↳Note that Plateau phrenes of the first and second thirds are possible only in radical Deformation.

↳The original Plateau phren is located at the right end of the Plateau, on the Progress Curve.

"Multithesaurus" (HS subcode)

"It looks like a Little Magellan. On the right, behind the Sea Serpent..."

"You know."

"I used to know, didn't you. Can't you get it to work?"

"I've never seen the inside of a Fang, not even on film. Who cares about the guts of machines? It's some kind of technical loophole. Try it yourself."

"What if it's not idiot-proof?"

"Well, we'll be surprised."

They were in a small, rectangular cabin, with only one chair — so they were both standing. The walls of the cabin were soft, yielding to the touch. They discovered that if they pressed them at the right angle, screen windows opened on them, displaying colorful two-dimensional images, sometimes right at the point of pressing. Subsequent presses launched subsequent functions. In this way, they scrolled through the sky scans from the external Fangs on the screens.

It would be hard to find a more default interface; maybe audio — but that didn't work, they tried. Besides, they expected a language barrier. Then they noticed that a four-point instruction had been burned into the floor. The instruction was written in English, which was a good sign, the Fang came from the Homo Sapiens Progress.

It was so short because it ended with the point:

FIST → PLATEAU

Zamoyski could box as much as he wanted, they were under blockade.

The problem was reaching the navigation functions of the Fang. Since everything here — like in the entire Civilization — had been designed with processing on Plateau in mind, the thing seemed impossible.

They had been playing with the touch interface for some time, and they

had not gone beyond the basic commands, changing the point of view, internal schematics of the Fang, self-diagnosis, and the like. When Angelica managed to decipher the macro that closed the hatch, she was happy as a child.

The rest was clearly written into the relevant Plateau Fields.

They had left one vicious circle, only to fall into another.

"What do you say?"

The Three Crow flapped its wings helplessly.

"I can't remember, I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, for sure."

Angelica allowed Zamoyski to freely converse with the nanomat and try any combination of caresses and blows on the fleshy walls of the room. She watched Adam, retreating towards the corridor. In retrospect, she couldn't quite recognize the moment when she had given up and relied on the ingenuity of the resurrected man. She didn't feel like trying his hand at these techno-puzzles with him, if she won, she would humiliate him even more; if she lost, she would embarrass herself by defeating an ignoramus. Besides, she knew well that Zamoyski still held a grudge against her for eliminating the biological manifestation of the kidnapper.

She walked through the corridor, immersed in semi-darkness, to the very threshold of the articulation chamber; here she sat on the floor (also soft). Leaning out, she could look out through the peristaltic shaft outside the Fang—up, to the right, down, and a moment later up again. The rooms along its axis, behind the flexible joint, remained relatively still, but the Fang itself was still turning—they couldn't stop it, it was probably impossible—and in the round frame of the hatch, the sky the color of an apocalyptic storm and the earth appeared alternately, a light brown tapestry with an indistinct pattern. Even this narrow image was partially obscured, because the hatch was overgrown with the mesh of Angelica's nanomatic safety cocoon (Zamoyski had been the first to enter the Fang).

He still values life and death in absolute categories, she thought. in-out, *on/off*. Meanwhile, here, everything is in fractions, in pieces, in lame approximations. From a purely logical point of view, such a division makes no sense -

but for so many centuries culture had to somehow accept it, to “understand”. That even if I die, I will be in a new empty hollow; not me, but nevertheless me. Subjectively it is absurd. I live, I die; me here, an empty hollow there, a purely external identity. But when a person is raised and lives in a world - in a culture - in a Civilization - where such things are considered the norm, where members of one’s own, closest family live/do not live in fractional forms, where this blurring of the “I” reaches - in the case of multiple manifestations - dimensions characteristic rather of objects from quantum physics - then one involuntarily “grows into” this mentality; nonsense logic. How can one rip apart such a deep network of associations?

Why should I do that at all? After all, it is Zamoyski who does not fit into this world and is unable to understand it.

I must not lose my sense of proportion. I am a Stahs. Now it is most obvious. Now that I am even thinking about it; that Adam managed to touch me with his reaction. Yes, I am a Stahs, and it will take its toll on me...

Zamoyski’s shout reached her. She returned to the cabin. The light here came from the blue phosphorescent edges of the walls, and everything in it was an inch closer to the grave.

Zamoyski stood in the farthest corner of the cabin, slashing his own hand and the rubbery material of the wall with Angelica’s hunting knife. The blood soaked into the floor at his feet, distorting its surface into black bubbles and pores, like corrosive acid.

“What have you come up with again?”

Without looking back, he pointed his hand (the uninjured one) at the wall on the left, where mysterious constellations were rotating on the artificial satin of night.

“What’s that supposed to be?” he asked rhetorically. “A transmission from outside the Sak, right? But how with the Plateau blocked? You said that the first Plateau was created for this very purpose. To navigate the Fangs.”

“Yeah, right.”

“But pulsars, for example,” he finally looked back, “you see...? This is where the loop is glued together, the file starts from the beginning, the flashes are

uncopied. The last recordings, I bet." Here he paused to draw some more blood. "So there are emergency procedures. It knows what to do in the event of being cut off from the Plateau."

"But why are you cutting yourself?!"

"Do you see any first aid kits here? First aid kits? Robotic surgeons?"

Angelica looked around helplessly, involuntarily succumbing to Zamoyski's rhetoric. the three-raven was cleaning his feathers in the corner, only the middle head was looking at the resurrected man. Who was currently smearing blood across the mangled wall.

"But - why are you cutting yourself?!"

"Because now it'll have to help me, and without access to Plateau it'll choose an emergency algorithm."

"What do you mean?"

"If it can't get help. What would it do?"

"What he was programmed to do."

"I think no one reprogrammed it on purpose, everything is on Plateau. It's just standard hardware with a rudimentary stage. At least that's how it behaves. It's profiled for HS physiology, and that gum, or whatever it is, reacts to human blood, you see? I realized it when it accidentally dripped from my arm, from that cut of yours; it hasn't healed yet. If so, then Fang won't wait for me to bleed to death! Right?"

"You mean that's what you hope."

"Don't you remember what you told me? That human safety was coded the most deeply into Fang programs, the highest priority, the first directive - don't you remember? When Plateau supervision disappeared - what was left? Only these archaic algorithms, the original OS, the ancient commandments."

Looking over his shoulder, he grinned at Angelica from his thick beard.

"I've worked on computers long enough. Programs don't really evolve. They build up. The twenty-ninth century, right? I bet if I dug deep enough, I could find

some MSWindows or an even more primitive DOS at the base. The only thing you can always count on is the consistent stupidity of machine intelligence."

Angelica preferred not to ask what would happen if the Fang simply had a different logical structure, an OS less inclined to improvisation; at most she would have managed a stuttering "but". She had no idea about the internal ROM of the Fang. She doubted that there were a dozen Stahs in the entire HS Civilization who had such knowledge.

The hatch immediately slammed shut with a dull clang and the corpse phosphorization remained the only source of light. He, Zamoyski, a clay sculptor, a madman at work, continued to press the sticky red into the cut material, pressing it with his entire body weight. He leaned forward more and more - and Angelica noticed that she was also instinctively changing her body balance to adjust to the new vertical. She looked back at the windows full of stars. The same images were still on them.

She remembered the sequence she had recently tried and with three quick blows opened a direct view from Fang's armor.

The image was chaotic anyway due to the whirling motion, but it changed too rapidly to be explained solely by Fang's rotation. The reason was different. They flew through loops - either so tight or so fast. They flew through space-time loops - one after another, a blink of an eye on the landscape, she would squint and miss the change in the horizon...

Finally she understood that Fang was not moving in relation to the Sak's loops at all, but was solving them one by one.

So where did the acceleration come from? Big and constant increases. She had to sit down, then lie down. Zamoyski collapsed like a log in a moment. 3g at least. The folds of clothing were reflected in Angelica's skin with hard lumps, there would be bruises.

This isn't a false move, she thought, trying to keep her head turned toward the direct-view window. We're actually going at 3g. Fang is trying to get out of the Sak, but since there's no such thing as a "partially open Sak," it has to destroy it to do it. Then the movement will become movement in an external frame of reference—and we'll be out of the blockade that the Wars have put in place. But that's on a power plane, not by jet propulsion and Newtonian speeds.

It doesn't matter which way the Fang is heading then. It will definitely sail at maximum slip, the deepest power wave, since it has already considered the situation to be an emergency. But no, the direction does matter, after all, it will automatically turn to the Home Port, thus revealing the identity of the owners. Hmm, would they be so foolish as to leave such data in his memory? Besides - without access to Plateau, how would he know the current location of any Port? So the direction is indifferent, at least at first.

So the point is to enter the Plateau Fields as soon as possible and send the information. To whom? Gnosis, Judas, that's obvious. Yes - but the exit from the material interfaces of this Fang undoubtedly leads to the Kidnappers' Fields, we could just as well delete ourselves here. Damn it, why didn't I think of that earlier?

Her neck went numb and she had to turn her head anyway. Zamoyski cursed loudly. She breathed shallowly, with effort, concentrating on the work of her diaphragm and chest muscles.

What way out of this situation? Think, girl, think! Any place in the Universe is arbitrarily close to any place on Plateau - so it's only a matter of the default configuration of the connection system. Do we even have access to any other system, except the company's Fang system?

She glanced at the silver-feathered bird (he was clearly not impressed by the overload). Another potential threat, stupidly overlooked. The moment they escaped the blockade, the nanomats would reconfigure themselves and return to the control of the programs from the Fields assigned to them - the Kidnapper's Fields. *Ergo*, get rid of the three-raven!

What else? What else? For God's sake, there has to be a way! How would she tell Zamoyski now that it was all for nothing, that he had tried in vain, that although they had managed — miraculously indeed — to get out of the Sak, to escape from the blockade, nothing would come of it, because they had no method of connecting with safe Plateau Fields — how would she tell him that...? She wouldn't be able to. She burned with shame at the thought alone. He would just look — without reproach, without fury — look, and then look away. After all, she had convinced him of all this herself; and she hadn't thought it. Well, she hadn't thought it! Bloody hell! (Even curses were losing their vulgarity, a bad sign). If only she weren't a Stahs...! If only she had a permanent implant in her brain...!

Of course! She laughed out loud, making her ribs ache. The simplest solutions were the hardest to find — first we always look for solutions that are as complicated as the problem.

So now that we've dealt with that... List of threats, point two.

"Smaug!" she hissed.

The three-raven toddled up to her head.

"As soon as we get out," she whispered with a shallow breath, "you're flying to the hatch. Right out from the Fang."

"I see," the three-raven nodded (two-thirds of the way).

Now Zamoyski. When will the Fang finally tear itself out of the Sak? My spine already hurts, and my lungs...

A reflexive muscle spasm threw her half a meter above the floor. Weightlessness. She checked the screen windows. Stars on both sides. Does this mean they've gotten out of the blockade and communication through Plateau has been restored?

She grabbed the back of the chair and returned to an upright position. If her memory was correct, the constellations hadn't changed, and Zamoyski's Small Magellanic Cloud was still there. Besides, just look at Smaug, you don't throw yourself at her throat.

Smaug!

"Hatch!" she growled.

He flew down the corridor.

She pushed herself towards the wall and placed her hand on the macro that opened the hatch. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that Zamoyski was lying motionless on the blood-spattered floor - he had probably lost consciousness.

She pushed her fingers into the wall. Nothing happened: she didn't hear a bang from the direction of the hatch.

A chill ran down her spine. Nanomat in the Kidnappers' Fields - locked with him in this tight cabin - murder in a cold nightmare - the end.

Furious, she bounced down the corridor; an imprecisely aimed push gave her a handsome bruise on her hip and shoulder.

In the dim light of the peristaltic shaft walls, she saw the silver-feathered Smaug crouching by the closed bulkhead about halfway along the tunnel. An airlock! The Fang had formed an airlock! Well, yes, she could have expected it; once again she proved shamefully unwise. It was a good thing that Zamoyski was not a witness to these fireworks of stupidity.

She returned to the cabin. She pressed the macro again. After a moment she pressed again. Then she hurried to check the shaft. There was no trace of the three-raven.

Calm now, she swam over to Zamoyski. He was lying against the unhealed wall, covered in drying blood up to his elbows. She took the knife from his hand and hid it. The cuts on the man's forearms were not deep; the deepest were her work. She tied the sleeves of the resurrected man's shirt. Without opening his eyes, he mumbled something incomprehensibly in some foreign language; she could not recognize it, despite Father Japre's lessons.

She shook Zamoyski. They both bounced into the air. She hooked her foot on the armchair and with an effort pulled them down.

"Adam. Adam...!"

Zamoyski was groping for something with his left hand in a daze.

She sat him down in the chair and strapped him in. Without regaining consciousness, he sat comfortably, reached forward, picked up an invisible object, brought it to his face (his eyelids still lowered) and smiled slightly.

Locking himself in place with his feet, she slapped him hard. He opened his eyes.

She leaned down, peering into them like a snake charmer; with both hands gripping the railing, she could maintain a parallel position, no matter how much he twisted.

“Listen to me. Are you listening? I don’t know how extensive this blockade is, but we’ll get out from under it eventually. In the same planck, the Fang’s brain will jump into its Fields. The Fields belonging to the kidnappers. I also don’t know how quickly they’ll be able to react or in what way - but it’ll be a race. Are you listening to me? We have to make contact with Civilization, with the Emperor, the Lodge tribunes, the Office or Judas. We can’t do it through the Fang interface, the transmission would go through the same, private Fields of the kidnappers. Do you understand? It’s you, you have an implant in your head!”

“What...?”

“One, two, three - you’re waking up, Zamoyski! You have to enter the Plateau.”

He snorted.

“How?”

“Directly. As soon as we fly out from under the blockade.”

“How ’directly’? I’ve never used the Plateau. That implant...” he felt his head, as if he could really feel it through his skull - was destroyed. “No. The attack went after the Plateau, the Fields were cleared. The connection grid remained. You’re wrong, you’ve been using the Plateau for months. Now you’ll just do it consciously for the first time. Look at me! You’ll do it! As soon as we’re clean.” “Come on, girl, I’m like this...” “You’re giving up? You’re giving up?” “What? No, I just...” “Well? Well?” “How am I supposed to do that?” he drawled, already alert enough to stir up cold anger in himself. “Well, tell me. I’ve got it,” she realized, and stepped back from the armchair. Only now did fear really grip her—because she really wasn’t certain that the grid in Zamoyski’s brain was still functional; that the structure and management programs had been preserved. She only remembered a few sentences of commentary made by her father about the side effects of the attacks. What’s more, she had never used the Plateau directly. She had only second-hand information. To Adam, however, she presented the face of an expert. “There are a dozen or so standard, most popular activation macros, deeply rooted in culture—like the macros of etiquette, a handshake, a kiss, a bow. Since your grid was laid for a different purpose, it is highly doubtful that the semi-inclusion would find it necessary to tinker with the interface toolbox. I assume the old default remains. Yes,

you are right, it all builds up. I will show you the macro call mudras. Then – it depends on which Fields your grid has been assigned to. You will probably enter the Gnosis meadows. The gatekeeper AI will take over. It will take care of everything. You won't even feel it. Do you understand? Do you understand?" He just smiled.

"What?" she was embarrassed.

"Nothing," he shook his head. "Show me the mudras."

She showed him; or rather, she explained. For the most part, they were figures of the mind, not the body. She had to trust him to do them correctly. He trusted her to describe them correctly.

The chains of associations, the rhythm of breathing, the imagery of geometric objects, the tension of specific muscles, those usually not used...

"Repeat constantly," she instructed him. "We don't know when we'll pass the blockade. Shout when you get in."

Did he smile now? His beard was covering it.

Angelica clenched her teeth.

"I'll write down the addresses I got out of that honey boy. You'll learn them by heart. They're long strings of letters. Can you do it?"

"You somehow remembered them."

"They taught me that in Puermageze."

"What?"

"That. Memory management. Making quick decisions under stress. Go ahead. Do it!"

He made such a face that this time they both laughed.

In Zamoyski's case, it was downright hysterical laughter. He tried to calm down — without success. He pointed at something with his raised hand — his hand was flying in all directions. He wanted to grab Angelica by the arm — she bounced off and flew into the wall of stars. He hit the back of his head against

the backrest. He kept laughing.

Angelica stopped laughing only for a moment to choke out:

“Go ahead!”

Then she was bent in half again.

He unbuckled his seatbelt and fell out of the armchair — right into the cut wall.

“Feed... feed... feed...”

“What?”

“He has to be fed.”

“Eh?”

His laughter carried him all the way to the ceiling.

Even when he had stopped feeling amused at all, his body was still forcing his lungs and diaphragm, twisting his face... Chronic laughter.

She had calmed down earlier.

“What did you say?” she gasped.

“If it stops recognizing fresh blood...”

“I understand.”

She pushed herself toward the front wall. Zamoyski passed her, returning to the armchair. She cut her finger, but it was not enough; she repeated the cut above her wrist. She then rubbed the blood into the already warped lining material, which caused it to swell again.

“We better get out before my veins dry out,” she muttered.

Adam buckled himself back into his seat.

“Addresses,” he reminded.

Where’s the notebook? Angelica frowned. Zamoyski had it, but he’d clearly

left it with the other stuff down there—in the Sak, that is—among its remains, somewhere parsecs beyond the stern of the Fang, in the African garbage dump stretched across the folds of devastated spacetime.

She cut out the addresses on the screen to the left, under the Magellanic Cloud.

ZAMOYSKI moved another table towards the center of the terrace and placed on it a black block of space with a row of gray letters composing long and meaningless words, symmetrically next to a stone tablet.

"SO now," he began, "I will perform these spells until..."

WHAT?

It must have been a brief loss of consciousness, he tried to stand up and staggered. The bug kept saying one thing, another. Weightlessness! I'm in orbit. He looked around the room. Nina emerged from the dimly lit corridor, clearly worried about something.

"What..." he stammered, "did I..."

He brought her here. She brought him. McPherson's people brought them both here. The agreement was signed; the agreement was not signed. Here was the TranxPol station. Here is the *Sunblock Beta*.

"You should finally get a good night's sleep."

She took his head in her warm hands, looked into his eyes with concern.

"I'm thirsty," he whispered, swallowing.

He raised his hand.

"Do I have a beard?"

"No, of course not."

“Where’s a mirror...?”

“Sleep, sleep...”

“It’s uncomfortable here. Let go.”

He looked at the walls. No mirrors. The screens gaped with starry emptiness, noble black with silver.

Maybe I didn’t... These constellations... Oh yes, *Ursa Major*, *Ursa Minor*, *Canes Venatici*, *Draco*...

Why in stone? Who in their right mind would drag a stone into orbit to put screens in it? An imitation, no doubt. He focused his gaze and looked over Nina’s shoulder. But stone. What’s more - the entire screen was made of stone, the stars sparkled on the stone. The Milky Way was like a white vein tracing a block of black marble across. The block is cracked, but — she wanted to stop him, he pushed her away, came closer, touched her — but these cracks are arranged in the letters of the Latin alphabet, clearly visible furrows of shadow from the moonlight.

Zamoyski’s legs buckled and he sank back into the armchair. Everything had changed. He looked around instinctively. There was no trace of Nina — only someone’s quieting footsteps behind a colonnade, an echo from under the terrace. On the nearest table lay a strangely carved crystal. He looked at it and could no longer look away. The Sak! Labyrinths of spatial loops! Angelica! Fang! Plateau!

Apparently, contact had been restored, a direct connection of the nanocortical network with the assigned Fields. But what exactly should I do now? Haven’t the Gnosis management programs realized the situation? Why didn’t I enter...

Idiot! You’re sitting in your Memory Palace, cut off from the world of the senses, and you’re still asking!

McPherson was feeding the wall In the Fang’s cabin. When Zamoyski opened his eyes, Angelica looked at him questioningly.

“I’m coming,” he told her, then got up and walked after a man in the McPher-

son livery of purple and black who was helpfully showing the way.

They went into a spacious hall, completely empty. Wide globes of sharp sounds shot out from the black and white checkerboard floor. The walls of the hall were so distant that the shadow hid them almost to the floor. Zamoyski couldn't see the ceiling at all. The alley of light was marked by two rows of tall candlesticks. They walked down the middle; his vision didn't reach its end.

How long? Time flies. Why these fancy visualizations? Can't you log in right away?

He grabbed the doorman by the arm, stopped him, and quickly recited the addresses of the Kidnapper's Fields.

"They belong to the owners of the Fangs who participated in the kidnapping. Do you know who to give this to?"

The doorman nodded.

"Why the delay?" Adam asked.

The other man freed himself from Zamoyski's grip.

"There is no delay. The archiving has been completed. Stahs McPherson is expecting you. The formalities always take some time with First Tradition Stahs."

"I won't chase you around like a rat in a wheel" Adam mumbled with momentum. In fact, he was already thinking about something else.

Stah McPherson is expecting you! Archiving. When? I can only see what they're shoving in my eyes. Not the Plateau; not the contents of the Fields; not even the management programs. A screen saver, rather, a desktop wallpaper, that's all.

He walked down the alley — into the semidarkness, into the shadows, into the darkness. The doorman wasn't chasing him, Adam didn't hear his footsteps.

He reached the very wall. Every few dozen meters it was pierced by narrow, high cracks, like embrasures; between them stood statues of dragons. The details of the sculptures were hidden by greasy shadows.

He looked outside cautiously. Some kind of park, I think - hectares and hectares of geometric greenery, paths, hedges, fountains, as far as the eye could see. Oddly enough, the garden was completely empty; not a living soul in sight. It was hidden by the starless blackness of the closed cosmos, which Zamoyski remembered well from Sol-Port. Night? But here, in the gardens, it was as bright as day. He raised his eyes and blinked, blinded. There, high up, soared firebirds. It was hard to even make out the exact shape of the creatures, eyes watering when turned directly towards them. White silhouettes blurred into watercolor puddles.

I wonder where they got this sensory construct from? Is it supposed to symbolize something? Or is it purely accidental — a reflexive surge from distant Fields?

Footsteps — and yet. He turned around.

The doorman, bent in a half-bow, pointed to the door next door. Since Zamoyski had not noticed them before, he assumed it was some new connection.

He ignored the invitation and showed the doorman the spaces outside the window.

“Actually... where are we?”

“The Imperial House.” When Adam did not react, he added “The Plateau.”

“Public domain?”

“In a sense. These are the Gnosis chambers. The Plateau HS belongs to the Emperor as such; all the more so to the House and Gardens. That is — in a sense. Do I need to explain the legal status?”

“Do you allow any interactions? If, for example, I wanted to meet someone...”

“There are crowds here, Mr. Zamoyski, millions; but you do not see them, because the Plateau is an Słowiński Inclusion.”

“How so...?”

“This way, please — the doorman turned to the door.”

Zamoyski approached, opened it. Stairs. Narrow, leading upwards, ending

with another door.

He took three steps at a time and at the top he tripped and fell. He fell very badly, striking his spine — the current went through all his nerves and Zamoyski stood up somehow shattered, not fully in control of his body.

He raised his hand, pressed the handle.

The door led to the main hall of the castle, in Farstone. Behind him were the stairs to the basement, to the right — a wide exit to the terrace, to the left — the tall, red-bearded secretary of Judas McPherson, Patrick Gheorg.

“Come in” Patrick pointed to the terrace. “You found Stahs McPherson at breakfast.”

“Did...”

“Our Inclusions have already made a full Purgatory.”

“What...? But is the information...”

“That doesn’t matter anymore. Things go their own way. Please.”

They went out into the sun

He remembered Farstone from Judas’ daughter’s wedding and now the lawn in front of the castle seemed absurdly large and empty, a space to fill, a field for memory. Here they danced, there he hit his head on a tree trunk and lost consciousness... Only the sky and the sun, they were the same.

Maybe it was that half-smile of Judas McPherson, the slight curve of his lips, not mocking, not intended to humiliate the interlocutor - but nevertheless placing him as a vassal. Zamoyski is the same height as Judas, probably even taller - but approaching, he feels as if he were climbing to the throne, tilting his head towards the monarch. Yet, on top of that, Judas is sitting, he didn’t stand up to greet Adam. He is eating breakfast at a table set in the corner of the terrace, otherwise empty. (And here, oh, here McPherson was killed.)

Patrick Gheorg pulled out a chair for Zamoyski. Adam sat down. The secretary nodded to Judas, then left.

They were alone. McPherson was buttering a roll, the sun shooting sharp

reflections off the bright steel of the knife. The Stahs didn't even look up at Zamoyski, and he had to find the appropriate convention of behavior on his own. In the end, he decided on forced joviality. He placed a napkin on his lap, pulled the tableware closer, reached for the jug. Breakfast was composed in a continental style, no puddings, which Zamoyski hated. He added milk to his unsweetened coffee; it steamed in the morning chill. Adam somehow didn't feel it. Probably too much adrenaline.

"Please tell her..."

Zamoyski raised his head from his plate.

"Yes?"

McPherson rubbed his thumb over the cheek under his left eye.

"She's a good girl, isn't she?"

A strange question from his father.

"Let's say... determined," Adam made a diplomatic evasion.

"Determined?" Judas smiled. "Indeed, I've managed to convince myself of that. So that's your first impression..."

"What should I tell her?"

McPherson waved his hand.

"Never mind. Besides, she'll tell you herself."

"So what did you want to talk to me about? Should I tell you the whole story? How much do you know?"

"Quite a lot. I'll get detailed analyses right away after draining your Purgatory. That's more than you could tell me yourself."

"So what exactly is it?"

"Oh, nothing can replace live interaction; not to us, not to the Stahs. I never really had the chance to meet you."

Zamoyski listened intently to Judas' words, searching his face for additional

signals. If there's interaction, then there's interaction.“

McPherson chewed with demonstrative ease, his gaze wandering somewhere along the castle battlements.

“Am I really that important?” Adam shook his head. “The cause of the war and all...”

“Oh, you're not the cause of this war. At least not in the sense of cause that you mean.”

“A prophecy.”

“A prophecy as a prophecy,” McPherson grimaced. He reached for the jam. “Broken echoes from an uncertain future.”

Zamoyski digested this, visibly confused.

“Hmm,” Judas mumbled after sipping hot coffee. “You thought it was because of you that the Deformants attacked Civilization?”

“Well... I don't know; because of something. This news from the Well, and the obvious correlation in time.”

“Oh, right!” Judas waved his silver spoon. “I should have informed you. Time, yes. It's the third of April. Almost a year has passed.”

Zamoyski irrationally looked around the park and the castle walls.

“There, in the Sak...”

“Of course.”

He was irritated.

“Nevertheless, someone found it profitable to kidnap me from inside Sol-Port! As far as I know, this is an attack without precedent. Does he have any connection?”

“We even know who” McPherson smiled. “The Emperor deigned to investigate the history of those Fields whose addresses you brought us, and the structure of their tenants. Do you want to talk to your kidnapper?”

“Excuse me?”

“The Emperor has them in the palm of his hand...” Then Adam raised his eyebrows “Figuratively and literally.”

Here Judas laughed, as if to emphasize a joke that Zamoyski did not understand, had no right to understand.

“So this data was useful for something after all...” Adam concluded.

“Oh, without a doubt! Phoebe Maximillian de la Roche!”

There was a noise, a short series of sharp cracks, the air above the terrace was agitated, a low whirlwind of dust rose from the floor and moved towards the breakfasters. In three beats of Adam’s heart the whirlwind grew to almost two meters and solidified into the figure of a fair-haired man dressed in a white kimono.

Judas swallowed, wiped his mouth.

“Do you recognize Primus Phoebe Maximillian de la Roche?”

Zamoyski watched the demonstration in silence, ready to jump up at any moment and jump over the terrace balustrade. De la Roche’s Primus stared indifferently into space, froze.

McPherson must have noticed Zamoyski’s tension - it was hard not to notice it, by the way - because he leaned over the counter towards Adam with a laugh; he even reached out to him, but Adam withdrew his.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” Judas explained in a theatrical whisper, forcing Zamoyski into a confidential form. “All the nanoware belongs to the Emperor; De la Roche manifests because the Emperor allows it. They are bound by a strong repressive protocol, by the way.”

“You arrested him... them?”

Judas nodded.

“Something like that.”

“All of them?”

"Oh, I see Angelica has managed to enlighten you a bit. But really, Mr. Zamoyski, you can relax, you're in no danger. What could they do to you?"

Adam pretended to turn his head, but he still glared at the Phoebe.

"I heard the nanomats tore out your spine," he muttered to McPherson. "Also under the Emperor, under the protocols."

"But we reformatted the Emperor, didn't you hear about that?"

"Oh?"

"Yeah, yeah. A little bit's changed in that time."

"What happened?"

"Too many spontaneous data eruptions on Plateau. Structural dysfunction."

"Was he fixed? Did you diagnose him?"

McPherson sighed helplessly.

"Yet she did not explain enough. You see, Mr. Zamoyski, phrenes from the higher regions of the Progress Curve are not subject to analysis within the framework of systems comprehensible by lower phrenes."

"What, please?"

"Yes, dictionaries, well... there are no Codes for the Abyss," Judas pondered. "Complicated, abstract terms are used precisely because their precise equivalent would be only a hundred words; and sometimes even a thousand is not enough. So to the initiated, to save time and purity of associations, speak to themselves, *apropos of*, in code. But I have neither the time nor the desire to conduct your Initiation now. Eat, eat, please."

He ate. The flavors burned his palate with the force of acetylene fires, the cups on his tongue shriveled under this attack. Even the coffee—even that coffee was coffee here raised to the power of.

"Mmm, so why the kidnapping and the rest in the end?"

Judas nodded to Phoebe de la Roche.

“Animals” the primus spat.

“Speak, speak” McPherson encouraged them with a movement of his hand.

To Zamoyski, again in a whisper, as if the Phoebe really couldn’t hear him then, he said,

“Protocol imposes obedience. they will tell.”

“How much do you remember?” Adam asked the Phoebe.

“How do you measure the extent of your own forgetfulness?” The Phoebe snorted. “Fool.”

“Of course i’m a fool” Zamoyski muttered. “Do you remember then why you desired my stupidity to such an extent?”

“Don’t you see what he’s doing?” hissed Maximillian’s primus. “He drained me to the brim. He took out what he wanted, added what he wanted. Think about it, even if I was behind this attack, would I be so stupid as not to immediately erase my memories of the crime? But you are completely defenseless, you can’t reformat yourself, you can’t lie about your manifestation. Now you’re giving him a full simulation for free. Look!” they pointed at McPherson with a straightened finger, Judas was just breaking bread and didn’t even look up. “He’s listening! He’s observing!”

“Of course” Adam nodded. “I’m his.”

“But you don’t know his phren.”

Zamoyski felt more and more like an actor whose scripts had been swapped at the last minute. He turned to the aristocrat.

“Are you reprogramming me, Stahs McPherson?”

“He’s reprogramming you” Judas aimed his knife at De la Roche.

“One doesn’t exclude the other” Adam observed. “In fact, we all reprogram each other, constantly.”

“But not consciously” The Phoebe pressed “so what is this reprogramming? Statistical noise. He’s trying to influence you with full premeditation. He read

the conclusions of the analysis of the phrenium models from your Purgatory and is now implementing a sequence of psychological pressures. He's lying, of course."

"Are you lying, Stahs McPherson?"

"Constantly" Judas replied.

"My dear Maximillian" Zamoyski shook his head "after all, it was he who brought you here; and he drained you, too, even earlier, even more thoroughly; he and the Emperor and all the police of your Civilization."

"Indeed. Consider, fool, the consequences of both eventualities. What is said is said—you had not considered these possibilities before, and now you will not forget them. The words were spoken—even if they were lies. You do not know that. So what did he do? He reprogrammed you."

Zamoyski closed his eyes.

"Enough," he whispered.

There may have been a way out of this labyrinth, but at that moment he did not see it. Phoebe Maximilian de la Roche had brainwashed him. He remembered what Angelica had said about "posthuman beings." I am indeed a fool. What was I trying to achieve here, challenging a 29th century superintelligence to a chess tournament? It was like trying to fight the Sun with a hoe...!

"Why did you summon him?" he asked McPherson.

"I thought you would want to ask them a few questions."

"Why? You know the answers. I am asking you."

Judas glanced at the Pheobe's primus. They smiled narrowly, adjusting the composition of the kimono folds with their long fingers.

"Get out," the Stahs growled, and the nanomat turned to dust, which immediately dissolved into a cloud of completely invisible particles in the air.

"Ask."

"What was I needed for?"

McPherson looked at the gray sky, clicking his tongue.

"Remember that blonde you met out here?"

"Ah."

"That was De la Roche's work, too. In fact, they tried to forget about it, but the Emperor wrote it down before he could cut those facts out of his memory. So we've got most of the conspiracy's history. Thanks to you, of course; thanks to those addresses."

"When? After all, it was only just now."

"Count on a-time." You were read the moment you entered the Gnosis Fields.

Zamoyski frowned. He desperately tried to keep up. What questions he didn't ask now would remain unasked, there would be no second chances, or at least he shouldn't expect them. How many more months would pass before they returned to Sol-Port?

"If you were relying on my archives... how can you be sure it wasn't a fake?"

"Let's just say... it was convenient for me to assume it was true."

"How long - five minutes...?"

"I just sat down to eat."

"So they didn't have much time to tell you."

"True. Tell me."

"No, no, no. I'm asking. A blonde. Further."

"A blonde. Maria Archer, a Stahs of the Third Tradition. Once... she was my friend. A dozen or so years ago, one of the Slopes passed dangerously close to her Fields. The Emperor checked and the checksums seemed to match. In fact, however, a certain open, independent, non-codex Inclusion—we now know that it was a secretive Horizontalist—had managed to smuggle itself into her Fields, taking advantage of the momentary chaos. In this way, De la Roche gained access to Maria's archives in this way. On the eve of Beatrice's wedding, Stahs Archer suffered a fatal 'accident'. She had already read herself with a

burning hatred for me and an iron plan to kill my hollow. It was the first part of Maximillian's intrigue. But, as you probably realize, murdering the body doesn't solve the problem: at the same time, I should have had my archive files destroyed or falsified. To do that, they had to enter the Gnosis Fields. The task was made easier by the fact that this attack could already be as open as possible. The Horizontalists-co-conspirators from the heights of the Deformants provided them with the tools. So they really went deep. The devil knows, maybe they would have even succeeded. But that earlier attack, the one that I know you didn't see, caused a reflexive update of my archives in my private Fields. Lucky, one might say."

"Who was the author of the first attack?"

"Well, poor Maximillian didn't know that themself. But I'm getting at something else, that de la Roche managed to transfer part of the contents of the Gnosis Fields to their Fields during that assault. Maximillian later managed to recreate and decipher the reports from our Time Well among other things. I read about you there; and I indexed you high already at the wedding: they also thought that you were a reserve target for the assassination, the second one after me; that it was no accident. So I consulted the matter with other conspirators. After this unsuccessful attack, they were terribly pressed for time, it was already a spiral of determination - they calculated that they had to go all out. Hmm, of course I am speaking in great abbreviations, because it is all Slowinski people and the Curve's mountain."

"Where's the Sak from?"

"From some Inclusion, which I think we have not reached yet."

"You have fallen behind technologically" Zamoyski shook his head. "Not good."

Judas was greatly amused by this.

"You mean Gnosis? You do not know what you are talking about."

"What am I talking about? They have the Sak technology, we do not."

"Do not confuse the categories. It is Civilization."

"I do not understand."

“Didn’t Angelica explain the Laws of Progress to you?”

“No.”

“Well. Take my word for it. We didn’t fall behind.”

“’We’, meaning who?”

“Us. Civilization.”

Judas noticed Zamoyski’s expression. He pushed his plate away, sighed, and wiped his mouth.

“Gnosis is not simply a trading company you see, it doesn’t even aim to make money, although I admit, we’re doing quite well. Gnosis is an essential element of the Foundation Agreement; without Gnosis, Civilization could not exist. Any contact with Deformants and other Civilizations must take place through us. Any information, in order to be posted on the public Plateau Fields of the HS Civilization, must be accepted by us. Any new technology, before it is implemented in Civilization, must have the *imprimatur* of Gnosis. All scientific research, especially UI Progress, the Abyss drainages, and the Inclusion races, is under our control. We control trade coming from outside the Ports. We censor information about other Progresses. If it weren’t for Gnosis, you wouldn’t find a single human in this twenty-ninth century, Mr. Zamoyski.”

“Wait a minute, what are you actually...”

“I really don’t have time here now to...”

Adam wouldn’t put up with another patronizing scolding. He waved his hand.

“Never mind,” he muttered and looked away. “But from all this it follows that De la Roche’s action was also the result of a misinterpretation of a leak from the future.”

The Stahs straightened his index finger, consciously choosing the pose of a mentor.

“Because here one must always be careful with interpretations. The very nature of the Well results in partial information. But even if it were complete... We know that we are not the only ones maintaining a Well. I don’t count the

Deformants and other Civilizations anymore - but many of our independent Inclusions have planted Time Wells somewhere in En-Ports. They receive data from them, digest them, and include them in their decision-making games. This in turn affects us. The fourteen Gnosis AIs do nothing else but process the probability trees of this system of mutual 'tomorrow-today-tomorrow' feedback. You ask whether you are the cause of the war? Ha!"

Zamoyski finished his coffee, leaned back in his chair, and rested his hands on the tabletop.

"De la Roche was right about one thing, you are programming me somehow. Because what's the point of this conversation? You didn't have to tell me all this. I don't have to tell you anything either, you can talk to my purgatorial simulations, if that's what they're called. So? What do you gain? Information? I don't think so."

"You're saying all this out loud."

"I know. To you. I'm just wondering how it really was..." Adam ran his fingertip along the edge of the table. "I'm just wondering... In the meantime, during this year, you received another message from the Well, the Gnosis Well, the Horizontalists or something else. You did, right? You drew conclusions from it and suddenly decided to gain my sympathy. But since someone like you can't just make friends with someone like me... You started with that breakfast. The opportunity presented itself." Zamoyski sighed loudly with both resignation and distaste. "The rest is cotton wool."

"Yes, yes, of course" Judas nodded absently. "Have you noticed that we're on first-name terms?" He wiped his hands and pushed away from the table. "Since you've seen through me so beautifully, you'll probably just as quickly convince yourself to dislike me, won't you? I'm sure you'll succeed. Oh, they're back. Come, come, unfortunate victim of my friendship."

It's terrible. Zamoyski felt at that moment that he could really befriend this man. He wanted it.

The words were uttered — even if they were lies.

They left the terrace and headed for the stables. They circled the east wing, following the edge of the pond. (Here they threw stones.)

McPherson whispered into the air in an unknown language: commands, questions.

The horses greeted him with a polite "good morning." They gave Zamoyski blank looks. The Amazons brushed their fur. Shouldn't the servants do that? Maybe they liked brushing them. He saw a man in work clothes, forking hay. The smell of hay was like a bouquet of old wine: heavy, thick, dampening the air, seeping through the sinuses into the brain. When was that... how many years... Had I been riding? The smell of horse sweat. He felt dizzy.

"So you're Adam Zamoyski. Finally. I think we should... Sorry." She led her mount to the box. He complained sarcastically; she calmed him down by patting his neck. Returning to Zamoyski, she took off her gloves and let her hair down. It reached below her shoulders. "Angelica McPherson."

He shook her hand.

"Nice to meet you."

"I hear I've spent the last six months with you, and on some crazy off-port trips."

"Only a few days, on your part, in fact."

"And on yours?"

"A month, two. But days, too, in fact."

He glanced at Judas. McPherson sent him an amused look over the back of his wife's mount. He spoke to her in an undertone and then turned his head away.

Angelica, meanwhile, was looking at Zamoyski searchingly. She clearly expected a more decisive reaction. She had approached him close enough to force it with her silence alone.

Adam, on the other hand, was weighing his suspicions in his mind. Had Judas let her in on his plan? Or had he "programmed" her in the same way? Or maybe — maybe Zamoyski's suspicions were the result of multi-level reprogramming...?

"I thought you were studying at Puermageze."

“Puermageze is no longer safe.”

“Yes, indeed, they’ve, um, riddled the area a bit.”

“You have to tell me about me.”

She took him by the elbow and pulled him. A crushing *déjà vu* rolled through Zamoyski. He let himself be led without will. He swallowed bitter saliva. His body listened to him with perfect submission, submitting to the next reflexes.

They climbed up a side staircase to the second floor. He didn’t ask where they were going. He asked her what she was doing. She went on about the political nuances of the situation and the position of Gnosis and the McPhersons; it was clearly a regular topic of social chitchat here.

On the way, Zamoyski noticed a characteristic bas-relief: the same coat of arms and the same motto as in the main hall. Now he was struck by the ambiguity of that motto. *Unguibus et rostro*. Indeed, all this power rests on claws, teeth, fangs.

Angelica noticed his amusement.

“What?”

He pointed to the coat of arms on the wall.

“Well, yes,” she admitted, “a bit of a conquistador show.”

“Isn’t that the role of Gnosis?”

“Conquistadors? Gnosis doesn’t rob anyone.”

“You have a monopoly on foreign gold. If I may put it that way.

Unnoticeably, the conversation slipped from a half-joking chat into a serious discussion. Angelica was confused. She was not yet very good at reading this man’s manifestation.

Because, as Father Praigne teaches, we always interact only in and through manifestations, whether it be the nanomats commanded from Plateau or the original body of a First Tradition Stahs.

“Realize this, child,” Father Praigne said, “this is a body, this is not you. Of

course, this is your body, through it you feel and let others feel it. Through it you recognize yourself as an individual, because phrenium cannot be seen, and we always identify ourselves through contrast. However, if you took it away, you would still be Angelica McPherson. It is simply another layer of clothing, only less frequently replaced and sensitive to stimuli."

"The Father simplified."

"Of course. I speak. I manifest. I have to simplify. I am just giving you the seed of an idea. You must plant it, water it, nurture it."

She wasn't very good at it. She had fallen into a strange hypocrisy. She was perfectly aware of the triviality of other people's physical manifestations—that was how she had been raised, and she was able to see "through" the physical, subconsciously separating the temporary form and the essence of being—and yet she thought of herself as that physical manifestation.

"Who?" "Me". The image under her eyelids was a tanned girl with long limbs, dark hair obscuring her face.

Even more striking under the gaze of the mirror, a mud witch, an elephant killer. An icon of physical form.

Until she entered the medical cell of Puermageze to make her annual archive, sat down in an armchair, still sweaty from running from the ocean, Father Floo handed her a glass, she drank, the nanojuice was cool, slightly sour, she gave the glass back to the Jesuit, they talked for a while longer, she wiped her face on the material of her T-shirt - and fell, choking on the gelatinous goo, onto the basement floor under the tank being emptied of steaming liquids, naked, shaking with uncontrollable shivers. Some men tried to lift her. Terrified, she wanted to run away, move away... They lifted her up without difficulty, helpless, she couldn't even control her breathing or the movements of her eyeballs. They were the first ones, by the way they surrendered to the mind, after only a few seconds. She could then focus her gaze on individual people for longer. In the one who walked next to her and two steps in front, half-turned to her and constantly talking, she recognized her father with amazement. She had often seen him on television in Puermageze, so she had no doubt who he was, Judas McPherson. A series of explosions under her skull, naked - cover yourself - straighten up - dad - Farstone - do not show joy. When had she last seen him? God, how long ago - she had been six, seven then. It was an abyss. She actually did not remember

anything. He had brought her something as a gift - what? Sweets, clothes? He had taken her for a walk around the Puermageze area. It was the rainy season then, they had not gone far. She must have been crying.

One of those who led her (the whole procession wandered in circles between the tanks) pressed something to her ears one by one and she began to hear.

"...with Adam Zamoyski, a twenty-first-century Lazarus. Since we opened the Wars, we should put a cross on everything that wasn't Krafted at the time. Nevertheless, it is theoretically possible that you will have to synthesize phrenes. Considering the above, there is no longer much point in sending you back to Puetmageze."

Puermageze!

"Ykch! Ykkkch! Yyyrch...!"

"Slowly, slowly, now, spit it out. Did you spit it out? Spit it out! Hit her with which one!"

"Krch! Iii-ii... how much...?" she moaned, struggling with her tongue and vocal cords.

"More than five months" her father replied immediately. "Indeed, quite a loss. I should have insisted on more frequent archiving."

She saw her reflection on the surface of one of the tanks they passed. A red-haired man with a beard was floating inside on her face. She realized that the contents of all the tanks around her were identical. In any case, she didn't see the second Angelica anywhere—except for the one in the reflection: a woman covered in glistening slime with very pale skin. I need to get a tan, she thought. I killed the elephant, she thought. What a pathetic manifestation, she thought.

She didn't realize it at the time, but that was the moment of a radical reconfiguration of her phren and a disruption of her identity assignment:

THIS GIRL → ME

It was only the next day, after waking up in the silk sheets of the oak bed in the Farstone apartments assigned to her, when she went to the window and looked down from the second floor at the courtyard, tennis courts, and park (the

pale sun was shining through the clouds, puddles from the night's downpour glistened on the road), that she finally caught the thing in words:

"It wasn't me."

Then she read that the thing even has a name: phrenal transcendence. After all, a child does not associate itself with its body, its body with its name, or phren with what it sees in the mirror from the very beginning. Only after some time does it begin to speak in the first person, "I". Now there is a reversal of this process - the separation of the "I" from the body, from any manifestation. Phoebes descended from Stahs often recalled this experience as the first stimulus pushing them to cross the Threshold.

"Will I also go up the Curve?" Angelica wondered in amazement. Was this what Father Praigne had in mind? Impossible.

But she often and increasingly often caught herself on reflexes and feelings that would not have had access to her at all before being read and implemented in a new hollow. So the alteration took place. The theory had predicted it anyway: each time a structure is imprinted in the brain, it introduces another element of uncertainty, a factor of chaos.

She confided in her mother:

"Now that's all in quotation marks. If anything were to happen..."

"Eh, don't exaggerate."

"But yes! Really! Why would I care? That's the impression, especially in the evenings, when I'm tired, and right after waking up: the whole world at the end of a very long tunnel; I'm looking through an inverted telescope. Not just my eyesight, but also the rest of my senses. Or pain. I strained my wrist yesterday playing tennis with Moetle. And what?"

"Well? Maybe it doesn't hurt, huh?"

"Yeah, you're laughing. Thanks for that."

"Did I offend you, huh? Offended. What, did you feel it immediately, right? ... Really, you're being childishly tragic."

"I know there are advantages - more freedom, no tension... But..."

"Come on. I'm taking you for a ride."

"No..."

"Come on, come on. You've already ridden with me and it did you good. The horses like you."

"Oh, she."

She haunted Angelica's silk-hatched dreams. There were detailed scans of Beatrice's wedding (also recordings from the flight to Puermageze) and Angelica had gone through them step by step behind her and, later, behind Zamoyski.

Zamoyski seemed to her to be a man more deserving of pity than any other feeling. His drunken charm, the awkwardness of his movements, the clumsiness of his broad-shouldered figure, and the way he had reacted to her words on the way to Africa... She saw it all clearly and distinctly. She certainly would not have treated him the way *she* had treated him.

Now, however, face to face with its manifestation... Pity was completely beyond the set of possible reactions. Zamoyski was already enforcing a completely different convention and Angelica could almost physically feel herself sinking into it.

Some people—Judas, Father Frenete—by their very presence deform the space of convention, so much so that anyone who gets too close—inevitably succumbs to the influence of these supermasses and turns into a new orbit marked out for them by them.

"The monopoly on gold," she replied, "has open Inclusions. We are only desperately defending ourselves against the curse of Midas."

"Who are those who did not defend themselves? The Deformants?"

She shook her head, already jumping two steps at a time.

"Progressions reduced to the final third," she replied, without looking back.

He rushed after her, but she still left him in the living room, barely flashing through the second, inner door.

"Excuse me, a minute."

The windows looked out onto the back of the castle. Some people were practicing fencing there, most of them half-naked. Only after a while did Zamoyski notice that they were fighting with sharp weapons. They were some kind of sword, maybe rapiers. One of the windows was ajar, but he couldn't hear any shouting - only the clang of metal.

Further on, beyond the courtyard, were tennis courts, an indoor swimming pool, a vast parking lot; next to it, the road to the private airport curved. From there I flew to Puermageze. Angelica said that...

"Excuse me. I'm here. Would you like something to drink?"

"Whiskey."

"You look a bit, um, battered."

"Indeed, he's throwing us around quite a bit. Thank you. Mmm. A-a, no - I had breakfast with your father."

She looked at him strangely.

With his hand and glass, he pointed to the courtyard.

"Who's that?"

"Patrick."

"Hmm?"

"Patrick Gheorg, my cousin, a McPherson."

"Which one? This one?"

"All of them. They're arranging new hollows."

He blinked, looking at them against the sun. True, they were similar.

"They're not a Stahs" Angelica added, sitting down in an armchair. "The black sheep of the family. But father likes them. Besides, an ideal secretary should be able to split in times of need, don't you think?"

"It must be quite a need" Zamoyski muttered, casting a last glance at the legion of swordsmen.

“There’s no hiding it, a complicated situation, a time of upheaval.”

“Well, exactly” he gasped, sitting down as well; he placed the glass on his thigh. “Maybe you’ll finally... Judas, it seems, has assigned you a role.”

“Governess?” she smiled.

“A lure.”

“Oh?”

“You know, when you go fishing, you cast a line,” he demonstrated “and at the hook...”

“Drunk already?”

“Nice dress.”

“Thank you. Patrick, if you would, check the membranes of Mr. Zamoyski’s Transmission Fields.”

“Who was that for?”

“Patrick Gheorg.”

Zamoyski looked around instinctively.

She burst out laughing — but not mockingly; he even found the laughter somehow nice and relaxing.

“I told you they weren’t a Stahs.”

“What was with those membranes?”

“It’s the way you use Plateau...”

The door opened and a breathless thirty-something man in an incomplete white cotton suit rushed inside: no jacket, but a waistcoat. The sleeves of his silk shirt were rolled up, and Adam immediately turned his gaze to his right forearm. A colorful tattoo wrapped around them: a dragon. Zamoyski had seen very similar creatures on banners and wedding tableware — and on this coat of arms.

“Moetle,” Angelica frowned, “what the hell is wrong with you?”

Moetle looked at Zamoyski.

“I just heard. Good thing I made it. We need to talk.”

“Is that some kind of password or what?” Adam was irritated. “Should I know the answer?”

Patrick Gheorg peered through the open door.

“The Plateau is fine,” he said, then withdrew their head.

Zamoyski, completely disoriented, squinted sadly into the interior of his almost empty glass.

“I just remembered that I’m an alcoholic.”

“That’s what I mean!” Moetle shouted and went over to Zamoyski’s armchair. He tried to look him in the eye; he couldn’t. So he crouched down and caught the gaze intended for the glass. “You remembered, didn’t you? What? Everything! Right?”

“Moetle...” Angelica pacified him.

He waved her off without even looking back. He didn’t take his eyes off Zamoyski’s face.

“I can try” he muttered “to remember...”

“Great!”

“... for a fee.”

Moetle’s face fell.

Angelica winked at Adam.

“Mr. Zamoyski is starting to assimilate.”

Moetle jumped up, raised his hands and eyes to the ceiling, performed some kind of pleading ritual to the rhythm of a bass murmurando, toddled to the door and back, then sat down on the back of the Biedermeyer sofa with a heavy

sigh.

“Okay,” he gasped, “hit me.”

“Hmm?”

“The sum, man, the amount of this fee.”

Zamoyski snorted.

“I don’t even know the currency!”

“So what the hell is this about?”

“Oh, some trifles,” Zamoyski muttered into the glass. “Citizenship. A piece of this Plateau. A few secrets.” He glanced to the left.

“Can I help myself?”

“You’re welcome.”

The bar was stocked with drinks he had never heard of—alcohols from foreign suns, from other Ports, from other physics... He spent a long moment reading the labels. The McPhersons exchanged monosyllabic remarks behind his back. He gave them time.

When he returned to his seat, Moetle feigned stony calm.

“These are absurd demands. Everything you have in your head is also in your archives.”

“What do I have in my head...” Zamoyski hummed. “I have your fakes, the career of a retired space conqueror — how many trade negotiations have I not participated in...! Fakes, as I say; but I remember. So maybe spare me these amateur bluffs and jump three levels up right away? If you had access to those archives, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You’re scheming privately behind Judas’ back. Pay up.”

Angelica looked from Adam to Moetle.

“Your serve.”

“Behind Judas’ back!” Moetle snorted. “Good one! Did you hear that, Pa-

trick?"

"Ahh!" Pacrick Gheorg McPherson shouted from the next corridor.

"You're imagining things too much. This isn't some kind of intra-family conspiracy. I just have to know."

"What?"

"What you told me then."

"When?"

"So you don't remember, do you?"

"I've never laid eyes on you before," Zamoyski said and took a drink.

Moetle pointed to his glass.

"I got you drunk. I got you dead drunk. I got that from your supervisory AI. She was filtering you; I broke Soyden's protocol."

"Ask her what I said."

He shook his head.

"Unfortunately. I erased it from her myself.

Zamoyski assumed the face of a disappointed idiot. He said nothing, just stared blankly at Moetle, his hand instinctively swinging the glass of alcohol.

Angelica began to laugh. It was the same laughter - highly contagious, from deep in the diaphragm - that had held them both in an iron grip for long minutes there, in the Sak.

This is no longer *deja vu*, thought Adam, this is the schizophrenia of reality.

"You are incredible," she finally managed to choke out. "You've got it together like a bushel of poppies."

"Yeah, there are three like the two of us, not one."

"What a problem," Zamoyski muttered, "let's take the hollows, turn on the copying, and off we go."

She kept laughing.

“Come on,” she finally patted Moetle on the back, “confess your stupidity to him.”

He just cursed.

“She is as unfathomable as the sea,” Angelica finished on a high note, then turned to Zamoyski. “He thought that Judas did not appreciate him, that he was being disrespectful, that he could have been higher in Gnosis. Corporate Shakespeare in a word. Then he heard, poor fool, about the riddle of the *Wolszczan* and a spur of ambition stabbed him. He will show us what he is worth! Where every Gnosis Inclusion has failed, he will succeed! What, wasn’t that right? Moetle? You were blowing testosterone bubbles through your nose.”

“Sister, do you think, aunt,” Moetle confided in Adam. “Or great-grandmother, depending on how you count. She’s known me for barely half a year, and she tells me my dreams before I even dream them myself.”

“Women,” Zamoyski agreed, “are systems of higher complexity, they analyze us easily; we — can’t.”

“The Heights of the Curve” Moetle nodded.

Angelica listened to them with obvious fascination.

“Like children, like children, like little boys under the stairs...”

But at that moment Moetle McPherson and Adam Zamoyski were already old buddies. They only exchanged glances.

“In any case” she continued “he got down to you hard. He clearly found out something, because he took a trident on his own credit and flew away from Sol-Port. There was no trace of him, no movement on his Fields for at least a year. Now it gnaws at him. What kind of death did he die?”

Zamoyski looked at the golden liquid with comical astonishment against the light.

“Truly, his power is great and secret.”

“It wasn’t just alcohol” Moetle snorted. “Alcohol was a cover for the AI, I

figured something else out. If it was just a matter of proper chemical stimulation... Why do you think you were constantly walking around tipsy, pumped up, with one foot in a daze?"

"True" Angelica agreed. "These are the twists and turns of cognitive science. You can have full archiving on Plateau, but that still doesn't give you access to all the information contained in the read mind. You let it go in time, re-process it under all possible conditions and you have a full Purgatory. A complete modeling of phren and memory. It will show you the probable behavior of the offender. But always only to the margin of some percent, a promille. There is always something below the horizon of the soul. Am I right, Moetle?"

"But now I hear that he remembered!"

"Well" Zamoyski hesitated "certainly not our last conversation."

"Never mind. What worked once..."

"Correct me if I'm wrong" Zamoyski pointed a finger at McPherson. "You're from the earlier archives. So there's no guarantee that your reasoning would follow the same path a second time. Besides... what's really behind this curiosity? Hmm? Would you fly there again? Nope; Judas's secretary is listening. So? What's the benefit? I wonder... What are you doing here in Farstone, Moetle? Is it a punishment? Because you're a Stahs, right? Oh-ho, don't make that face! I can see now that Daddy moved you to the reserves, and now you're trying to buy yourself back into favor, prove your usefulness. So buy your way into mine first and buy me citizenship."

"How clever."

"Thank you."

"A little drunk and a real Sherlock Holmes. Or maybe I can't afford to buy you citizenship?"

"Uh-huh. You could afford three Fangs."

"You said that you don't know anything about the contemporary market."

"I'm buying that too. Knowledge."

Angelica leaned towards him.

"But really — will you remember?" she asked seriously, without a smile.

At such a *dictum* he could only shrug his shoulders and look away. Will he remember? He'll search the Palace and maybe he'll find it; there's a good chance. On the other hand — and he didn't intend to say that out loud — he was almost certain that this whole matter didn't matter much, or maybe Judas already knew the answer to Moetle's questions. One of the two, or rather the other — because during breakfast the head of Gnosis didn't stutter a word about this secret.

At one time, Judas had probably been genuinely interested in the fate of the *Wolszczan*. Why else had he kept Zamoyski here? Why had he put a net on his cerebrum, assigned him a semi-inclusion, injected him with consciousness modulators under the guise of alcoholism? Then he sent him back to Puermageze. But maybe after the news from the Well and the assassination (assassinations!) he had no choice. In any case, he would learn about Adam's transaction with Moetle at the same moment it was concluded. Or probably even earlier; most likely — he already knows.

"Well," Zamoyski muttered, "I'm not demanding payment in advance."

"You, madman," Angelica turned to Moetle, "you don't really want to fly there a second time, do you?"

"Come on, with the Wars all around us..."

"Exactly," Zamoyski interrupted, "what about those Wars? If we were captured by the Deformants right after leaving Sol-Port, and the Wars fell on the Deformants in turn, then where are we, me, where am I now in relation to Sol-Port? Which way is it heading? If I know your course since the Plateau blockade laid, maybe I can catch up with you somehow..."

"What?"

They exchanged gloomy glances. It didn't bode well. Adam motioned for them to say it out loud, and leaned toward them.

"Hmm, that wouldn't have helped anyway," Moetle finally muttered. "Sol-Port hasn't opened since the first Deformant attacks. That means seven months already. Complete isolation. The Council is right about that. We can't risk it. Besides, all the Ports of Civilization have adopted such tactics. Wars outside,

we inside. We are finally self-sufficient. We have to wait it out."

"Great!" Zamoyski snorted.

He put down his glass, stood up. He went to the window. They were still dueling, although there were probably fewer of them now—Patrick Gheorg McPhersons.

"Patrick!" he called.

Judas' secretary appeared on the threshold.

"The Emperor took over these Fields, didn't he?" Adam asked. "The ones I indicated."

"Of course."

"Who is in charge now? Or whatever it's called..."

"The Office."

"Huh?"

"The Lodge's investigative and repressive body."

"Fine. What is this Office — by the way, where do you get these names from? — what did this Office put on the Fang Fields? What is its flight plan?"

"As far as I know, it is very simple. To pull you out of the reach of the Wars and accelerate to the relativistic one until everything calms down. Then the nearest Port will accept you."

"Simple, indeed. Any predictions as to the date of the Great Calm?"

"Talks are underway."

"Talks?"

"Between the parties to the conflict."

"What was the *casus belli*, exactly?"

Patrick sank into one of the armchairs with a sigh.

Zamoyski closed the window and sat on the windowsill to keep an eye on them all.

“Well?” he pressed.

“How do wars usually start?” Angelica grimaced. “Contradictory reports, mutual accusations. They blame us for stealing a few thousand Fangs - an idiotic accusation; we have a claim to that attack *á la* Pearl Harbor.”

“I asked you,” Zamoyski pointed to Patrick.

Patrick answered, but not to that question.

“Stahs Judas McPherson has been informed of the proposal presented to you by Stahs Moetle McPherson and declares that he is willing to pay such a price for information about the purpose of Stahs Moetle’s expedition.”

“Now that’s rude!” Moetle growled and ran out of the room. Adam watched him go.

“Did he do it to spite him?”

Angelica shrugged.

“He has a purpose in this, that’s for sure.”

Patrick scratched the bridge of his nose.

“I’ve often found that people demonize Judas’ intelligence. For God’s sake, he’s a Stahs. He’s more likely to be guided by intuition. It could have just suddenly occurred to him; he remembered and made a proposal. So what’s it going to be?”

“Should I sign some kind of agreement?”

“No need. The Emperor is listening. But if you insist on a written form... we appreciate it very much.”

“No. I agree.”

“Okay.”

They were silent for a while. Angelica watched Zamoyski from under the

palm of her hand, on which she rested her forehead (she was sitting directly opposite the window). Patrick Gheorgh lazily massaged the septum of his nose; finally he got up and moved to the door.

“What, already?” Zamoyski was surprised.

“Agreement? Yes. You may start remembering.” The Secretary smiled enigmatically and left.

They were left alone, Angelica and Adam.

Fortunately, a fly flew into the living room. Buzzing loudly, it circled the ceiling, making irregular forays into the lower regions. They followed it with their eyes.

“So it looks like we won’t be meeting very soon” Zamoyski offered, turning his head after the insect.

“Well, at least then you’ll be a citizen of Civilization.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“You somehow remembered before.”

“Moetle, take this ’somehow’ with you to the grave” Zamoyski said with a sour face. “I can actually explain everything to myself somehow — the kidnapping, the moves of Judas, the son playing against his father, your political intrigues, the coincidence of the Stellar Wars breaking out at such a favorable moment for me — there’s just one thing I can’t understand. Why did that nanomat try to kill me, back then, at the wedding? I don’t remember it, but too many people have told me about it for me to doubt it. What the hell could anyone gain from eliminating my current body? Wow, that’s a conundrum.”

“Hmm, I don’t remember that either... I mean, I’ve only seen scans. Well, first of all, we should check when you were last archived and how accurate the sensory data recording was. You had a special semi-inclusion for that, so it was probably continuous archiving. That would narrow it down”

“No, thank you, I don’t want to see her in person.”

“Oh?”

He waved his hand to dismiss the subject.

He just happened to cross the path of a fly — it dodged, veering right in front of his face. He caught it with his other hand. It was struggling in his hand.

“Holy lightning! Indeed, the alcohol has polished me. With such reflexes I could defend a penalty shot by ear.”

“It’s always like this in unsullied nanomatic manifestations.”

“Huh?”

“You see” Angelica leaned towards him. “You see, the body reacts through the nerves, the impulse goes from the brain. Head — nerves — hand — movement. In the other direction, both correction and return, peak-peak, hundredths of a second accumulate. But the nanomats is controlled from Plateau, in the same planck the information about the movement reaches the manifestation’s neck and the hand, the delays are not fully simulated. It’s a bit of a strange feeling, but you can get used to it.”

“Indeed” Zamoyski said slowly, bringing his fist with the fly to his ear “I had such a funny impression...”

“Exactly.”

“But I thought I was on the Plateau.”

“Excuse me?”

“That it was a virtual simulation. The Farstone construct on Judas’ Fields. I could have sworn that...” he repeated helplessly. “I went in after all... Well, I did...”

He remembered his fear of De la Roche’s manifestation, and how he had finally overcome it: convincing himself that it was all VR anyway. It even seemed to him that this was what Judas had suggested. *You’re not in danger. What could he do to you*?

Well, that’s not true. But does that mean that he should have been afraid after all...?

“No-no-no” Angelica shook her head. “It really is Farstone. You are present

here in a material way. Although the transmission is of course through Plateau — how else?"

With his other hand he felt his face, his chin, touched his shirt, crumpled his trouser leg.

"That's all — are these nanomats...?"

"Yes. In your manifestation."

He brought his hand to his eyes.

"I can see the veins under my skin! I can feel the blood flow! The warmth of my body."

"Patrick, remove his complementary simulation." Then she turned to Adam. "The smell? Can you smell it now?"

Bzzz-zz, zz-tz, a fly by his ear. Rapiers were clattering outside the window. The swallowed whiskey was still warming his throat.

"Maybe I'd better get to work" he mumbled.

A strong wind blew from the pond, the willows rustled loudly. He jumped onto the terrace. I didn't clench that hand, he thought. The fly flew free as I disintegrated into a cloud of fine dust. I should have said goodbye to Angelica. Regardless of Judas's intentions, she's a girl worth taking an interest in. In any case, the one from Sol-Port — the one from Fang had clearly begun to format herself into some twisted...

The rapier came out of his side, five inches of bloody steel. The assassin immediately yanked it out and charged again.

Zamoyski staggered onto the table with the Parisian photograph.

Patrick Gheorg McPherson made a classic palestra, missing Adam's kidney by two fingers. Screaming with pain, Zamoyski jumped behind a column.

He saw three more Gheorgs running up from the pond, their rapier blades gleaming in the silver moonlight.

Wars

PROGRESS CURVE (REMY'S CURVE)

A curve on a graph illustrating the relationship between intelligence (vertical axis) and the degree of utilization of the constant conditions of the universe (horizontal axis), starting from the environmental evolutionary form, up to the optimum.

↳ A curve identical for all species in all possible universes.

↳ The path traveled along the Curve by individual Civilizations of a given species constitutes its Progress. Within Progress, any number of Civilizations can cut off on the Curve. The internal stability of a Civilization is inversely proportional to the length of the section of the Curve
it occupies.

↳ Each Progress slides towards the top of the Curve, towards the UI.

On the Adaptation axis, two Thresholds are distinguished, dividing species realizations into three thirds. The first Threshold is the Self-creation Threshold. The second Threshold is the Meta-Physics Threshold.

The first third therefore include species in their environmental realizations; the second includes post-evolutionary forms (up to the Ultimate Computer); the third includes logical Inclusions (up to the Ultimate Inclusion).

DEFORMATION

Non-progressive realizations of phren. In the Remy Model: all evolutionary lines that do not trend toward the UI.

"Multithesaurus" (HS Subcode)

SCHIZOPHRENIA!

"You're gone!" he shouted at them.

They ran on - and the first one was just withdrawing his hand to strike. Open your eyes! Get out of the Palace! Forget it!

Thwack! He hit the top of his skull against the ceiling of Fang's cabin. He was dizzy.

Not yet fully aware of his surroundings, he reacted in a way appropriate to the gravity of Farstone (or the Palace) - and as a result bounced off the side wall. He blinked, not believing his eyes. From a distance of two inches, Patrick Gheorg McPherson was grinning at him, as big as a statue of Stalin.

In a reflex almost of panic, Zamoyski pushed himself back, towards the armchair. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the screen with Patrick smiling reassuringly - so first he felt the armchair, the armchair and the body on it. Angelica didn't react to the touch, she didn't say a word. Then he looked. She was unconscious. Blood was seeping from her cut wrists. She was still clutching the knife in her left hand. She was feeding the Fang until the end.

"Get her wounds bound," Patrick said through the speakers. "If it weren't for weightlessness,"

"I know," Zamoyski growled.

He glanced at the screen on the opposite side. The stars were moving apart, pulled into peculiar folds—stars, starlight. They were flying, and at a considerable speed.

However, the cabin must have been equipped with cameras, previously switched off, because Patrick had clearly caught Zamoyski's gaze—and while Adam was dressing Angelica, he said

"Weightlessness, because we can't waste fuel on the maneuvering engines. This isn't a Port, but a single Fang. In the saddle of a q-FTL wave, its speed remains very low, and its acceleration zero. Like now."

"Where are we flying?"

"I don't know."

"What?"

"After being cut off from the Plateau, I can't..."

"We've been cut off again?!"

"Yes. We're under blockade."

"Great. But before that happened..."

“We were flying to Creyton-113. It’s a black hole, far enough away. We’d enter a temporal pocket there. But now I’m just trying to get as far away from the Wars as possible. This is on the screen — it’s a simulation. In the external system, we’re moving faster than light and no information comes from the stern, but from the bow — with a shift depending on the angle at which...”

“I understand.”

He didn’t understand anything. A moment ago (but was it really just a moment...?) he asked who would enter the Fang’s Fields in Farstone, and the same Patrick Gheorg answered him was the Office. Now he’s looking — and whose mug is in the interface? P. G.

On top of that was this blockade. Could it be that the Wars are chasing us?

Where the fuck did Judas’ secretary come from in my Memory Palace?! This is Dick’s madness, a real Palmer Eldritch: I’ll open the toilet and a thousand little Gheorgs will come out.

Exactly - a toilet. Should I piss in the airlock? This Fang lacks basic equipment. He swallowed. His throat was dry, almost calloused. When was the last time he drank? His nanomatic manifestation - yes; but he, Zamoyski, his body, a biological void? The canteens were gone, as was everything that wasn’t tied to their clothes, stuffed in their pockets during the takeoff of Smaug’s balloon. So no water, no provisions.

Having tied the torn sleeves of Angelica’s shirt around her wrists, he strapped the unconscious girl more firmly to the armchair. He put the knife away.

“You’re sitting on Fang’s internal computers, right?” Patrick asked.

“That’s right.”

“You’re an Office program.”

“We’re all programs.”

“An Office program, but I can see McPherson’s face.”

“This phren overlay was selected as optimal for communication with you and Stahs Angelica. Phoebe McPherson offered their own phren.”

“Who?” Zamoyski was lost.

“Patrick Gheorg McPherson.”

Zamoyski shook his head. Too many coincidences: miracle, paranoia, or Friday the 13th.

“Priorities” he snapped.

“Safe transport of both to any of the HS Civilization Ports when it becomes possible to open them.”

“Transport me or her?”

“I said both.”

“But in a crisis? A necessary choice?”

“You.”

So he was right, Judas was lying! Zamoyski himself, Zamoyski’s memory - was important to someone. Certainly to the Office.

“Our status?”

“More precisely, please.”

Indeed, without Plateau, it was a rather dull AI here

“If I gave you an order...”

“It depends what kind.”

“Haa!” So there is a loophole.

“I always gladly accept sensible suggestions, especially in conditions of such limited computing power.”

The formula seemed empty to Zamoyski. In order to be able to choose the more sensible of solutions A and B, the program itself would have to be intelligent enough to be able to analyze them further than the one suggesting them, so what the hell does it need such suggestions at all? True, it is always easier to criticize a thing than to invent it. The most valuable thing is that which cannot

be algorithmized, imagination.

Suggestions... A stick in the eye.

So what should I rather wish for myself? To prove more or less intelligent than I am?

“You can probably calculate how long a person can survive without food and water? Not to mention such a detail as oxygen - because we have air supplies here, I think? Oxidizing cells? Anything? Hmm?”

“The Office Inclusions have considered this problem” Gheorg/Office replied thoughtfully, and a shiver ran down Zamoyski’s spine. He recognized the intonation. “We should have reached Creyton in thirty-eight k-hours. Even considering the loss of blood you and Stahs McPherson...”

“You mean” Zamoyski interrupted “we should have reached it. You claim that after being cut off from the Plateau you don’t even know which way we’re going. By the way, I wonder how that’s possible. You probably remember where you were aiming.”

“It doesn’t matter. We could have been krafted in any way by external operators. The War, for example. The radiation reaching us could be a false reflection from the Port’s internal loops, where we’re chasing our FTL wave in circles.”

“So why the hell don’t you get off this wave and check what’s really going on?”

“Because now, in our own spacecraft, we are at least protected from direct threats. Please note that we can get out of the Plateau blockade at any moment and then we will find out anyway.”

Zamoyski listened and listened, and his paranoid suspicions grew.

He even interpreted this blockade — the fact that they had once again found themselves within the range of the Wars — as indirect evidence of his own importance to the powers of the 29th century. He was the one they were hunting!

He almost believed it — at a time like this.

“So you intend to wait” he said. “How long?”

“The simulation based on your previous encounter with the Wars shows the area of impact of the blockade. If we have not been dismantled, we should be out of it in about five hours at most.”

“Oh. Is there a toilet around here somewhere?”

“Unfortunately no. Fangs are not manned ships. Mr. Zamoyski, there is no such thing as manned spaceships. You travel in Ports—there you can have whatever comforts you want.”

Because it’s damn sure there are none here.

Adam settled himself in the corner by the door, in an imaginary vertical, so that he could see both screens and Angelica in her turned chair.

It didn’t look like a collapse—she was simply asleep, now a few years younger again. In her sleep she was forming her lips to unspoken words...

With difficulty he freed himself from the spell, looked away. Sleep... not a bad idea. Sleep for at least those five hours. When we finally regain connection with Plateau...

He cursed quietly. Citizenship is within reach. All you have to do is enter the Palace, find an exhibit, remember. But—but he saw Patrick Gheorg with a friendly smile and his hand reaching for his rapier-pierced side.

However, this was already such a high absurdity – to be afraid to look into one’s own memory, to return to the imagination, for God’s sake, who had ever heard of such idiocy?! That this fear affected Zamoyski more like a red rag to a bull. Out of pure anger – he would have returned there anyway.

This time he did not lower his eyelids; he saw the interior of Fang. But his attention drifted away from this view with every second and the focus of Zamoyski’s consciousness shifted to the landscape permanently engraved in his memory – the landscape with willows, the pond, the Moon and smooth-stone ruins.

He approached the terrace slowly, cautiously, looking around in all directions. Where exactly had those fencers come from then? The first one had jumped out

straight from the shadow of the column.

Zamoyski entered the terrace, squinting into the depths of these shadows. Two tables were overturned, the frame of the photograph with Durenne was cracked.

He stopped in the middle of the horseshoe, as far away from the columns as possible. The smells mingled in the air, simultaneously pulling him into a dozen or so mnemonics. He waited. There was silence. Angelica began to scratch her forearm in her sleep; fortunately, he had tied the bandage tightly. The wind was cold, Zamoyski got goosebumps. He rubbed his arms. Gheorg/Office watched with interest. Between the trees, from where they had run out, only bushes were now waving.

What am I waiting for? He looked around at the tables. Let's start with this one. One, two, the smell of burnt wood, and a third step, and then a man's arm closed his neck in a strangling grip.

Zamoyski threw the assassin over his hip, hooking his foot around his shin. They flew into the exhibits, Adam and Patrick Gheorg.

Swearing aloud, he flew all the way to the wounded, bloody front wall of the cabin. Again, he couldn't control his reflexes.

Gheorg/Office pretended to follow him with their eyes from the screen.

"What?" Adam growled on the screen.

"Everything okay?"

"Like hell."

"Are you using internal connections?"

"What?"

"The implant programs."

"No."

This time, he ran onto the terrace. They were already waiting, seven of them. He took out his machine gun and shot them. The last two tried to escape the

phalanx of bullets, to hide - he fired a long burst after them along the terrace. He got them all.

As he was changing the magazine, four more Patrick Gheorgs dashed in zigzags from the trees. These, of course, were already equipped with firearms. They advanced in jumps, two by two; at the same time, the other pair were pounding heavy salvos under the roof of the villa. Zamoyski had to hide behind a column.

He waited until they reached the terrace itself. When he heard them jump onto it, he yanked the pin with his teeth and threw a grenade in a high arc from behind the column; a second and a third a moment later. Explosions tore the night apart, the moon shook in the sky. Fragments fluttered around, separated by a stone pillar into two fronts of a storm of metal - if he had stuck his hand out there, all that would have remained was a short stump: bone and blood.

Then he walked through the ruins of the villa and the surrounding area, counting the bodies. He didn't count any, but that was no wonder, considering the degree of their dismemberment.

He was surprised to see that one of the Patrick Gheorg McPhersons was alive. Alive—dying, stretched out on the stairs, red saliva on their ginger beard, their body chopped, their hands shaking. He would cough if he had the strength to take a deep breath.

Adam leaned over the manifestation.

"Who are you?"

"Die!" Gheorg whispered.

"Who?"

Zamoyski put the hot barrel of the gun to his forehead.

"You have no right..."

"What?"

They were barely breathing, choking on blood.

Zamoyski almost pressed his ear to his lips.

“You will not destroy...” Words quieter than the wind.

“What? What?”

“...the universe.”

And with that spectacular line on their lips, they gave up the ghost.

“The richness of my inner life truly astonishes me.” Zamoyski smiled wryly at Patrick on the screen.

“My conviction of my own importance has led me to a God complex.”

He jumped back onto the terrace. No new attackers had appeared. Even if they had, he probably wouldn’t have paid them any attention. Only now did he notice what he had done he had destroyed all the exhibits. Their unrecognizable remains and pieces of tables were strewn among the marble rubble all over the terrace.

He picked up a fragment of some electronic device, turned it over in his fingers. The object had no smell.

He shook his head and...

...remembered again. The moon, the pond, the willows, the ruins. He stood a dozen or so meters from the stairs, in the same place as usual.

He came closer, looked in. Everything was shattered; there were no bodies, but the Palace was in ruins.

Again. To remember.

He ran up, looked.

Ruin, ruin — remains.

Again.

The same.

There was citizenship, now there is no citizenship. Damn. Because of your own stupidity; and your own complexes. (What else?).

Go to a psychiatrist, Zamoyski. Get treatment. You may not know it, but you have the soul of a serial killer.

(“Plateau?”

“No.”

“So what is he doing”?)

He came to his senses. Angelica was awkwardly unbuckling herself from the armchair. Her gaze was fixed on Zamoyski.

“All right, all right” he reassured her.

She was still looking at him suspiciously.

“Did you copy the Plateau Archive?”

“What? No. I mean” Zamoyski pointed to the screen on the left “I copied it.”

“I was just explaining the situation to Stahs McPherson...” Gheorg/Office began.

“It’s been nine months,” Adam warned, turning to Angelica. “I talked to your father. It was De la Roche’s doing, the second attack and kidnapping. I intercepted the message from the Well. Now it’s full-scale war with the Deformants, the Ports are shut down. We’re going to wait it out by the black hole. This De la Roche must be some kind of Deformant ally, right? Did they attack the Fangs by mistake or what? No idea about your politics. What does citizenship even mean?”

“Did Judas offer it to you?”

“What? No. Although...”

“He should have. Jesus, I’m thirsty. . . ”

“You’ve really fucked yourself up.”

“True.” She glanced at her hands, tied with the shreds of her shirt. “But, like you said, I had to feed him until I was sure the information had reached him and the Emperor closed the Kidnapper’s Fields.” She muttered out of the

corner of her mouth to Patrick, “You could have shown yourself earlier.”

“You were already unconscious, Stahs” said Gheorg/Office.

Zamoyski was silent. He had brought up the subject before he thought, and now he was only swallowing saliva through his dry throat. A sickly heat burned him; if he had put his forearm to his forehead, he would probably have scalded himself. He could not look away — because then Angelica would have guessed everything, he was convinced of that: a small gesture would be enough, and he would betray himself. The girl would read Zamoyski, as he had read her over the Pandemonium crater.

So full control. He would not let anyone know that — he had forgotten about her.

If it were not for the Wars, how long would he have stayed in Farstone? If it were not for their blockade, he would have returned from the Memory Palace to Farstone, not to the Fang. Angelica would have bled to death here. He had forgotten about her.

However, he immediately became irritated and turned his anger away from himself. What is it, do I owe her something? Where does the remorse come from? Where does the shame come from? I forgot — well, it happens. There was no intention of harm in it.

However, he was aware that at this point he was faking his feelings.

“Angelica.”

“Hmm?”

“Listen, I would never...”

WHAT exactly did he want to say? It clouded him. He moved his lips mutely.

The swirling kaleidoscope of colors drew his gaze to the right: the stars on the screen had changed.

“...that all the spirals have fallen,” Patrick/Office said. “The Fang is incapable of further Krafting. The Wars have probably passed us by. We are more

than seven light-years from the nearest public star."

Zamoyski, his head strangely heavy, with a pink moth on his eyes, reasoned slowly as if in a dream. What are "public stars"? So - do private ones also exist? Well, yes, those locked in Ports. So everything in the open galaxy... No wonder they had complaints about stealing a few parsecs. If everyone krafted space according to their whims..."

"Plateau?" Angelica asked.

"Still isolated."

Zamoyski noticed that he was slowly sliding down the wall, diagonally, above the screen with stars. He waved his arms, but there was nothing to grab onto.

"What's wrong?"

"I'll correct it right away."

Indeed, after a moment that trace of gravity disappeared.

"So we still have some kind of drive?" Zamoyski muttered, drifting back to the safe zero-g angle.

"Maneuverable."

He now remembered the overload they had been escaping from the Sak with. Well, yes, there was a drive - but even counting on a constant 3 g, they had no chance of getting anywhere in a reasonable time.

Angelica must have thought the same thing, because she exchanged a long look with Adam, half horror and half amusement. She puffed out her left cheek and narrowed her left eye. But hands, hands reached for the bandages on the incisions, fingers curved into claws, transferred the tremors from the inside of the body.

"How much..." they began simultaneously.

Again the glances, the sour silence.

Cut off from the Plateau, Gheorg/Office did not show much intuition.

"What is the question?"

Zamoyski waited it out - lips pursed, hand massaging forehead and covering eyes.

It was Angelica who said it aloud.

“How much time do we have left?”

“About fifty-seven hours in the model for both, Stahs.”

“What exactly are these Wars?” Zamoyski burst out in the silence that fell after this statement. “Are you registering any Fangs nearby? At all - anything? Patrick...? First they explained to me that nothing can isolate the Plateau - then the Wars do it. Then I learn that the Fang. . . ”

”I am receiving a signal without a Civilization identifier” Gheorg/Office interrupted him. ”The initial estimate of the source distance is a quarter of a million kilometers.”

Zamoyski let out a breath from his lungs.

”Deformants” Angelica muttered.

”After drowning, the quartered one should be shot on a burning pyre with poisoned bullets” Adam commented dryly, moving along the wall towards the screen.

McPherson snorted behind him.

”Where are they?” He tapped the stars with a finger dirty with blood. ”Show me.”

The constellations shifted. A pulsating red dot appeared between the dark nebula and the triple star, a graphic marker.

”Relative velocity.”

”Ten kilometers per second in close-up, but that’s mainly from the Doppler effect; the perpendicular component is still uncertain. However, we would have certainly passed each other by a considerable distance.”

“This signal,” Angelica asked, “what is it?”

“A distress call. In Code.”

Adam instinctively looked at her.

"It's a kind of the *lingua franca* of the Galaxy," she answered the unasked question.

"How?" Zamoyski snorted. "A universal language? Interspecies? I don't believe it!" But even as he made such a vow, he knew how much he was doing, because he should believe in everything.

"It's not quite a language," Patrick/Office clarified. "You will never have to deal with a 'naked' Code, you always evolve appropriate compound interpreters. Just as colonists bred interpreters of native languages, otherwise incomprehensible with children of native mothers, civilized fathers, raised at the crossroads of cultures, a bridging phren was formed in them. The Code and the Slowinski processor are enough for breeding compounds. The signal from the Deformants came in an unprocessed form, which may be indirect evidence of their being cut off from Plateau - but even that is already a derivative of the Code. Naturally, I intend to respond to it and go to intercept it, so we will learn more."

"What?!"

They both turned to the other screen, to the face of Patrick Gheorg McPherson.

"I ask for counterarguments" he said. "I'm listening."

He listened, but they - at first they were dully silent, then they grimaced, mumbled evil words, finally Angelica admitted:

"Now it doesn't matter whether they are enemy or not."

It did not sound optimistic.

What more was there to say? They sped toward the Deformants (or rather, not toward them, but on a tangent toward the capture point) from $1 \cdot sothatthearmchairwasnowonthewall, thescreens$

It took them a little over an hour. Gheorg/Office helpfully displayed a clock; they could count the fleeting fractions of life.

Zamoyski counted something else, the probability that this next wave of Wars had thrown two of its victims so close together. After all, this was no cosmic crossroads, the center of a crowded planetary system. So? A coincidence? Even

if it was, it was probably the last such in his life.

The Deformants claimed that, indeed, it was a coincidence on their part. Gheorg/Office exchanged information with them in the Subcode. They passed summaries of the translations to Angelica and Adam. It was going slowly; the Deformants had to grow a Code emulator for the old English, which, apart from Słowiński Inclusions, was almost impossible in a reasonable a-time. The code put the translators in the position of physicists solving the equations of motion of many masses slower than those masses move.

Then, when they saw the source of the signals in close-up—instead of a graphic symbol—the source of the signals themselves, they understood: these were not Deformants—this was Deformant; one. Gheorg/Office had even asked them about their origins in Progress—but the others did not know or did not want to reveal them. Besides, it did not matter. Maybe he came from *Homo sapiens*, maybe not.

"What do you mean that it does not matter? Alien or not Alien!"

"Really?"

It stretched for almost ten thousand cubic kilometers. At first, when it still fit entirely on the screen, it resembled more a mold growing in a vacuum—from a lace of slender, almost invisible threads, through their increasingly thicker braids and braids, to spherical tangles, swellings, adhesions.

"If such a lifeform is possible in our universe, then sooner or later it must come true."

"The Drake Equation operates with such large numbers. . . "

"This has nothing to do with the Drake Equation. It is the Law of Progress. Once started, Progress, if not cut off before crossing the First Threshold, will realize all possible forms of life in a given universe in a finite time."

"I thought Progress was heading straight for UI..."

"Oh, but I am not talking about Civilizations, but Deformants who break away from Progress! If the physical conditions of the universe open up some ecological niche, then there is no force, autoevolving phren will crawl in there too. Then what does it matter which Progress it comes from? It is defined by

that niche."

As the scale decreased and they saw more details, associations with a torn anemone, a dissected circulatory system—the circulatory system of an organism struck by a salvo of shrapnel—predominated. They would not be able to help him.

E claimed to be dying. The wave of Wars that had destroyed the Fangs' innards had rolled over em, and what remained was indeed a vivisection.

"But after only a few hundred years... How could e have gotten so lost in eir evolution so quickly?"

"Other Progresses are older. Besides, even if e comes from HS—e could have become sub-Slowenski in eir Port, eir ancestors. Perhaps you are looking at the millionth generation. What does it matter whether generation number one was a hairless ape—or a homeostatic gas cloud?" The Deformant did not belong to a species adapted to life in a vacuum, as Zamoyski had initially imagined. (Did it belong to any species, or was this category alien to Deformants?) E lived in a Port—but the Port had been torn apart by the Wars. The procedure resembled the removal of entrails from a body, only more brutal. That Port—or rather En-Port—a subtly carved multiple loop of space-time, was the Deformant's only natural habitat."

Moreover—the Deformant emself was partly that Port; the living analogues of the Fangs that maintained the Port were eir organs. Kraftoid, Angelica said. E filled that pocket of four dimensions, stretched across an incomprehensibly complex grid of Zones; the jagged Sak was a straight highway next to it. There and in this way only life processes revolved—here, however, they saw as much as would remain of a man run over by a steamroller and then thrown into the void. The Wars played the role of the steamroller.

Zamoyski told Gheorg/Office to ask the Defomants about them. The other didn't know either. They claimed that they didn't know much at all; that they weren't involved in the conflict. By definition, Civilizations are a compact, organized structure. Deformancy is a pan-anarchy. Some and some can band together to achieve a goal—now, apparently, such a circumstance occurred—but most keep their distance, usually not even communicating with each other.

"Let me get this straight in my head. Time and space are smooth clay.

Physical constants deform it this way or that; some combinations of them cause such distortions, others - others. Then we take a pot of dough: life. We pour it out: this is the First Threshold. The dough covers the entire clay, filling every bump and crevice. Whichever way we pour the dough, it will always bake in the same shapes, determined by the distortions of the clay. Am I right?"

"Mostly."

Gheorg/Office asked em for eir name. From the set given in the Code transcription, e chose "Francis" for translation. Francis claimed to be a million years old and that e was a Slowinski. E was — now e is no longer. Now e is dying.

"And we, and I — am I before or behind the First Threshold?"

"Look at the Curve. Its shape is the same for every kind a life, from whatever evolutionary niche it started. Zero on the vertical axis means the development of phren. The curve starts from under the axis and goes through pre-civilization structures into classical civilizations. In *Homo sapiens* biology, this section more or less reflects the quantitative ratio of neuroglia to neurons in the brain. Further on the Curve we have cyborgizations. To the left of them — random, brilliant individuals within the species, or the peak achievements of eugenics. Down from cyborgization — compensatory prostheses. Continuing along the Curve to the right, we pass the First Threshold: the beginning of the mass, conscious self-creation of the species. The first third, from point zero to the Threshold, in the Homo Sapiens Civilization is filled by the Stahs. The type of Tradition determines the degree of their shift on the Curve."

"So where are we on it?"

"You and me? Here." Angelica pointed to a point on the screen about halfway through the third, above the Curve. "The genetic material of the Stahs has undergone some preliminary selection. I'm not sure about you, but this should be the area. You have access to the Plateau, but you can't transfer to it; you can copy the mind of a monkey, a dog, an ant to Plateau, but that won't turn them into logical inclusions. Look, now we're entering the second third of the HS; the phoebes. On the Curve, we have neural-machine interfaces here. It is generally a series of logical, electronic, biological, chemical, quantum and other machines. Then a large area is occupied by disembodied phrenes. Below is a weak AI. Then we reach the Second Threshold along the Curve and the boundary point here is the Ultimate Computer. Then meta-physics and sharply upwards, into

Inclusions. Remy gave a logarithmic scale on the intelligence axis so that there was something visible in this monstrous acceleration of Progress."

"Exactly. Who the hell is this Remy?

"Remy, Alphonse Casimir, two hundred seven, two hundred eighty nine, writer and *science fIction video creator*, creator of the Theory of Convergence of Progresses."

"Thanks, Patrick."

"And Słowiński? What, Angelica? Another *science fiction* classic?"

"Oh, right. No, Phoebe Słowiński is an outstanding meta-physicist. They determined the limit acceleration of time in an Inclusion. Faster relativization cannot be drawn even in layers. Currently, all logical Inclusions are Słowiński Inclusions."

"Francis — are they such an inclusion?"

"An inclusion? No. Inclusions cannot be torn apart by any Wars, Inclusions are separate universes. Francis... well, e are simply a Słowiński Deformant. Statistical noise of the cosmos, life is possible — therefore realized. Get used to it, there are only things that are logically contradictory and non-contradictory. The former are impossible, the latter — necessary."

They flew into a navy blue-celadon-gold net. The golden fragments are those that are still alive. Gheorg/Office turned on the Fang's spotlights (from the outside, the Fang probably looked like a huge pine tree of light now) and could admire the colors. However, Zamoyski was disgusted by this sight. It was all too organic, too turpistic, too much associated with rot — although in a vacuum there could be no talk of any classic putrefactive processes. But the associations rolled through his mind.

Intestines tens and hundreds of meters thick.

Tendons like frozen ejaculations of inky fluids.

Nerve ducts like pipelines through which liquid gold was pumped.

Other veins, other organs — cut, torn, torn apart by internal explosions; many blind endings, cauterized by a temperature close to zero Kelvin.

Yeah, Francis had eir guts ripped out.

“The Deformants?”

”You have the Deformants everywhere here, they are in the middle of the graph. First, they are leaving the Curve. Second, they are breaking away from Civilization. You can see it better on the Progress Model. Thanks Patrick!”

“It looks like the skeleton of a tipi, an inverted glass.”

“Each Curve is a single Progress from animal to UI. It can contain an infinite number of Civilizations. The third axis of the Model was introduced to illustrate the differences between species. The Progresses therefore start from points far apart, to converge in the vicinity of the Ultimate Computer and then climb in a tight bundle almost vertically to UI.”

“Francis. . . ”

“Somewhere here. Second, third third, it is hard to say.”

It was dying, but its dying was the same size, identically stretched. Years, e said, centuries. Organ by organ, brain by brain, as it equalizes its temperature with the outside — it will fade away, as the stars fade away, just as slowly and just as inevitably.

E still called for help. Even assuming that the Plateau blockade would last indefinitely, there was a chance for Francis to be saved: the cry coming from c in the Code would eventually reach someone with functional Fangs. The Deformant would be saved—in some rudimentary form. Or, at least, finished off.

They could not recreate eir Fangs on eir own, not after such destruction. They saw eir remains, tangled in kilometer-long flounces of tissue. Zamoyski understood then the aptness of the name—for they were fangs, the half-mile-long carious teeth of a star monster, crooked, black incisors, absorbing the light of the spotlights almost one hundred percent. He had to ask Gheorg/Office to increase the screen contrast.

Meanwhile, Gheorg was busy with something else; bargaining. Francis could be an isolationist Deformant, not from the HS Progress, but he had heard of Gnosis and the McPhersons. Zamoyski understood the next truth that there is, in addition to metaphysical constants and the Laws of Progress, another

absolute, was economics. Even in the most fortunate coincidence, it will cost Francis a fortune to get back to the state e was in before the Wars. So e bargained hard with McPherson—how much is an extension of the phren line of one of eir manifestations worth to em? Adam Zamoyski himself was clearly not mentioned in these negotiations at all. When they finally reached a compromise, he did not understand the terms; and he did not ask.

The view on the screen stopped changing. Very carefully maneuvering (after all, they were in the bowels of the Deformant), Gheorg/Office aligned the velocity vector of the Fang with the Kraftoid one. However, despite all this caution, he could not avoid touching Francis's body - a shock went through the Fang and Adam and Angelica were thrown against the wall of the cramped cabin.

It took Zamoyski a moment to realize that Gheorg/Office had not made a mistake at all. They had struck gold and a shiny web was now overgrowing the Fang's beak. The shots from the cameras placed on the Fang's spearhead showed it in awkward foreshortenings, Francis' intestine was at the very edge of the field of vision.

Zamoyski asked Gheorg/Office to simulate an external shot. Then he finally saw clearly: how the Deformant was devouring the gray-blue Fang, absorbing it into itself with obscene slowness. Starting from the stern, from the wide base of the cone, over which he had stretched the purple membrane of the lymphatic cavity (or perhaps the anus); from under it poured a foamy goo, a purple jam. All the way to the tip of the Fang, on which, like on a generator, a golden bindweed, a spiral of cold fire, wound itself.

"What is it doing...?"

"E are generating a biosphere for us," Angelica replied.

When the time came, Gheorg/Office opened the airlock. Zamoyski subconsciously held his breath, but cool, fresh air blew into the cabin.

He swam down the corridor all the way to the wrist. The golden glow emanated from behind the hatch with such force that he had to squint. Francis was pouring into the Fang.

First, on the hot wave of that light, a hundred openwork butterflies with wings like sails; then, scratching loudly on the walls, an army of diamond be-

etles. The beetles leave behind them a rough trace in the material of the Fang, narrow paths of mysterious engraving - which are already followed by blue shoots, dozens of sticky snake ivy. From them grew buds of golden liquid bursting into fountains of quivering drops. And in the drops something also lives, moves.

Adam was reminded of animals digesting their prey before swallowing it. The wounds on his forearms, inflicted by Angelica and by himself, stung him sharply, not letting him forget the sensitivity of his corporeal packaging—his bioware, as McPherson called it.

He returned to the cabin, ordered Gheorg: "Wake me up when McDonald's grows here," and then fell asleep; that's what he was capable of; falling asleep in weightlessness at a whim.

Angelica watched him for a long moment. When he was asleep—he looked more like the Adam Zamoyski she remembered from Farstone. Lost, tired, slightly frightened, defenseless. She touched him with the back of her hand, he turned in the air. This is your hollow, Adam Zamoyski—but who are you?

In fact, he was awakened by the pressure of urine in his bladder, already painful. He lifted his eyelids and for a split second didn't know where he was. He was hanging under a large yellow leaf, surrounded by a jungle of gold, navy blue and black, bathed in a honeyed glow. The air smelled of cinnamon. The exuberant baroque of organic forms reminded him of the Burmese Soma Gardens: he had spent his last vacation there with Nina, sunbathing naked under the rhododendrons, the sun then...

Crack...

...he remembered his dream, remembered Narva...

...crack, crack...

...he already knew how to get citizenship.

He clenched his fist.

"Yes" he whispered. "Yes, yes!"

In the meantime, however, physiology was winning.

He grabbed a leaf, pulled himself up, turned around. The golden curtain parted to reveal a sleeping Angelica McPherson, floating in the air in a fetal position, her mouth open and her hands slightly clenched, like an infant.

He glided in the opposite direction. Somewhere here he should have come across a corridor and a peristaltic shaft - but he couldn't even see the walls of the Fang.

"Patrick!" he called quietly, so as not to wake the girl.

"Mr. Zamoyski..."

He looked around.

A swarm of insects poured out of the thicket (they shimmered blue and lime green in flight), to configure himself before Adam in the form of a pale monk in a thick habit. The hood was thrown back to reveal a light tonsure, his dark hair bristled in an uneven donut. The monk looked very young; he smiled shyly.

The components of eir manifestation were many orders of magnitude larger than the imperial nanomats, and there was a certain graininess to eir silhouette—certainly not every hair had been individually modeled and assembled here."

"I'm afraid they won't be of much use to you, Patrick," Francis said in classical English. "The hardware, the Fang's processors, hmm, have proven to be quite insensitive to the modifications I've been forced to make."

Zamoyski looked around.

"It's all too big, too big," he muttered. "You've dismantled... dismantled the inside of the Fang?"

"I've dismantled it... let's say. But don't worry. I probably won't have to host you as long as we originally expected; that's why I've abandoned the synthesis of the anabiozers. Someone should be along soon."

"Communication?" Zamoyski asked quickly. "Plateau?"

"Yes. That means — mine."

"What do you mean yours?"

“Ah. Yes. I was informed of your condition” sighed Francis. “The Plateau is not the UI, there are many of them, all Slowinski and with optimal Trans. Each Progress, each Civilization has its own. We use thousands of Plateaus, if only as means of communication, trade forums. As soon as I regained access to one of the Plateaus, to which I am privy, I made the information about our location public. Apparently the blockade is selective, part of the Thievi Chart has already been discovered, part not.”

“Have you contacted Gnosis?”

“I have no doubt that the information has reached them. However, when I spoke of a short visit, I meant only the fact that it will not last for decades of k-time. For I dare to assume that your Civilization itself is in serious trouble. Rescue may not come so soon.”

“Well, yes, they closed all the Ports.”

“Mhmm...” the monk showed even greater confusion. “I meant slightly bigger problems...”

“Damn, indeed” the sleepy Zamoyski rubbed the back of his neck. “These Wars! If they destroy the mechanisms of all the Fangs along the way, then the Ports were opened by force. But” he calculated quickly ”this should allow Civilization to send a trident for us from the Fangs kept in the Ports until now. Unless they are so bad with equipment, and this war with the Deformants... that is... I wanted to say...”

Wake up and stop thinking out loud, you idiot! You are in the entrails of one of them. How do you know which side he is really on?

Francis shook eir head. E reached behind emself, grabbed a black vine, tore it apart, squeezed it. A transparent liquid flowed out of it. It slowly formed into a quivering bubble. Francis took it gently in eir hands, then spread eir arms wide; they repeated the gesture vertically. A semi-transparent oval of liquid now gleamed in the air, a viscous film. The Deformant’s manifestation moved it sideways.

At this angle, Zamoyski saw on that screen the black depths of space with a million starry sequins, arranging themselves across the film into the Milky Way.

“This is what we see from here,” said the monk. “But it’s just light. It’s

gone."

"Excuse me?"

"For thousands of years we will still be able to admire the divine tapestry of our galaxy; but it itself is gone. The wars broke free and went from arm to arm. Every particle of matter larger than a water molecule has collapsed. This also applies to all the Fangs that did not go on Kraft. There is no more Milky Way — there is only a nebula of black holes. Most of them have already evaporated. The gravitational structure and angular momentum have been preserved — but now only darkness revolves around darkness. The wars — the wars are still fighting. Were you looking for a urinal, Mr. Zamoyski? This way, please. That flower."

Plateau

SUZERAIN

A phren resulting from spontaneous flows of information/energy in the Block.

The first and only meta-physical intelligence.

"BLOCK"

A meta-physical hypothesis, which considers the set of all existing Plateaus as a concrete entity.

↳An entity of doubtful ontological status.

On the Thievi Chart it is calculated as $(n-2)-$ solid containing the optimal Plateau.

"Mulithesaurus" (HS Subcode)

All of these were fruits; even when biting into them until his jaws ached and he felt the taste of meat on his tongue, he didn't dare think of them as meat. After all, then he would then be eating Francis' body. So he ate fruit.

Angelica definitely showed no such reluctance.

"Hmmm, good, damn. And this?"

she asked Deformant about the next organs.

Finally, she tore off pieces and ate them without asking—a little bit of everything she could get her hands on.

Sometimes she spat them out in disgust.

Zamoyski's associations were different. We eat your insides; we are parasites, intelligent tapeworms.

But he had to eat. Just so he wouldn't think, eating what he eats.

"Smaug explained it to me, but it doesn't seem to make sense. What are these Wars, exactly?"

McPherson, floating in the air in a lotus position just below a silver bubble of water, behind which luminous vines-veins waved, sucked in liquid gold through half-snoozed lips.

"Mhmmmm, that's the thing, nobody knows. If they did, they could simply design and create it. After all, it's the same with open Inclusions and the Hive, with the technologies of the Abyss. We don't know where we're going until we get there,"

"Okay, okay, I get it."

She frowned.

"I don't understand why you're mad at me. You ask yourself, and then,"

"Sorry," he grumbled.

"Here, this will get you stuck."

He grimaced, but said nothing more.

The gold tasted like warm orange juice.

He stretched out his hand to grab the net of roots and pull himself towards the water, to wash off the liquid gold spreading over his skin and binding his limbs, an amoeba with muscles from surface tension... Instead, he fell.

His body (which he remembers) reacted faster than his mind. For he fell already kneeling, with support. Despite everything, he painfully bruised the bone of his forearm against the high armrest of the chair.

Hissing curses, he raised his head. Angelica's living room was plunged into semi-darkness. Outside the windows overlooking the courtyard stood night - starless, of course. On the other hand, through the ajar door from the corridor, a cloud of yellow light squeezed in, quickly dispersing over the carpet. He could almost see how this heavy light broke up in the air into smaller and smaller particles, which then silently soaked into the soft matter of the oriental carpet. He had his hand immersed in it, so he felt this softness; and he felt a massive light ascending from the floor, from the ancient fabric, along the lines of power, and filling his organism, more and more tightly, more and more densely, haa-aach! — and all in fractions of a second.

He stood up, straightened up.

"Gheorg."

Patrick Gheorg McPherson was already crossing the threshold. The door creaked beautifully, opening wider and wider as they emerged from the tunnel of light — waxy yellow, as if filtered through old parchment.

"Stahs McPherson will meet you in a few moments" they said in a hushed voice.

"Where's Angelica?"

"She's asleep." The Phoebe's manifestation pointed with a brief movement of their eyes toward the bedroom.

Zamoyski instinctively glanced at the closed door.

Without another word, they both went out into the castle corridor. Now the

source of the light became apparent: rows of candlesticks placed along the walls. Dozens of candles breathed in a discordant rhythm, light and shadow flickering on the surfaces of walls and furniture; and that silver armor — it seemed that it was already raising its arm, its helmet was already turning... In the candlelight, everything trembled in feverish expectation.

"Moetle?" Zamoyski asked.

"He was also only just notified. You see, Stahs, we did not expect the connection to be renewed, no one can predict the moves of the Wars, and..."

"What?"

"The Wars"

"What did you say?"

"That we did not expect..."

"That I am a Stahs? I received citizenship?"

"Stahs McPherson bought it for you."

"Which one?"

"Stahs Judas."

"Oh, yes..." Zamoyski nodded, as if he had expected it from the beginning. "Can we know what suddenly prompted him to do it?"

"I think he will inform you most fully about that, Stahs."

"In a few moments, eh?" Zamoyski muttered sarcastically. "But you know our situation, don't you? Since the Wars got you the outer Fangs, you had to open up anyway, even for a moment. Did you send a trident for us?"

"Two Universal Ports went."

"Huh?"

"Ports suspended on cubic octagons. Octagon to cube, Stahs: five hundred and twelve Fangs. That's the minimum if we're to keep the Port in Słowiński Time for even an a-moment."

”Do you want to sub-Slowinski us...?”

”You? No way. Universal Ports, Stahs, contain only a dead globe caught along the way as raw material, and a bit of imperial nanoware. After arriving at the site and reconnaissance of the situation, the Port accelerates to Słowiński, then drops inf. In the path of military technologies, this is the solution standing just below the Wars, the ultimate warship. Before the enemy even has time to notice the arrival of the cubic octagon, it will vomit an entire Civilization of Death on it: technologies of murder, intelligence of destruction, perfected for these circumstances over the millennia of the Port-time. The Lodge decided to send two Universal Ports after you.”

”For God’s sake, why...?”

”But please do not be afraid, it is for your safety and to deter, um, competition...”

Zamoyski looked at the manifestation of Patrick Gheorg, torn between rage, despair and total confusion. What are they trying to tell me? What actually happened here in the meantime?

Because if a Phoebe shows confusion and dismay with gestures, expressions and words, it is not because they really do not know what to say and is only just looking for an appropriate expression - but because they wanted to show confusion and I was supposed to notice it!

”What competition?”

”I can only guess what your current situation is, Stahs, nevertheless. . . ”

”What do you mean, you did not record me, did not archive me? I thought that as soon as. . . ”

”We no longer have the right. You are a citizen of Civilization.”

”Oh, yes.”

Gheorg raised their hand.

”Do you want to update the archive copy of your phren, Stahs?”

Zamoyski gave the manifestation a hostile look.

”No” he growled.

The other one lowered his hand.

”So the recording will not be made. It is obvious that consent is required.”

Now it is, and now it is obvious. Zamoyski leaned against the wall, folded his arms across his chest. But these *octagons*^{3}...! My God. The more he learned, the harder it was for him to believe. At first, he saw little, a cleanly swept stage, on which safe rituals were performed before him. But now, with each step, he descended deeper and deeper into the bowels of the theater, and the machines that appeared there, enormous and complex, shocked the sense of logic and aesthetics. The entire matter of the galaxy collapsed! Multi-parsec deflections of space! Space and time - up to superhuman speeds. What is this Słowiński Time actually like...? Inclusions - Inclusions of different physics. The laws of changing laws, meta-physics. Deformants, and UI. And Wars - what the hell are these Wars?!

The red-bearded secretary of Stahs McPherson—dark suit, silk tie, wedding ring on their finger (were they a spouse)—stood still, the candlelight bringing out demonic glints from the eyes of this manifestation. In those few seconds, while Zamoyski turned impossibility after impossibility in his head, Gheorg must have processed several thousand lives on Plateau. They are a Phoebe—was it this speed of thought that tempted him? Or maybe they were born a Phoebe...?

”A Slowinski?” Adam asked them.

Gheorg nodded.

”So you really live on Plateau, Phoebe, and these physical manifestations—they are just a poor interface, aren’t they? You are a citizen of Civilization?”

”Of course.”

Of course. They are a McPherson, after all.

I have to get rid of my subconscious contempt for non-protein people.

”What is it about the gender of Phoebes?” he asked to break the silence. ”I mean, I realize that it is neither female nor male, and I have to constantly remind myself of that so as not to get lost in these post-gender declensions...

Why not simply one or the other? I apologize if I have offended you, but I do not understand the purpose of these linguistic contortions. After all..”

”I am not asexual, I am not asexual” the Phoebe said dryly, looking at Zamoyski without blinking. ”It is simply that my sexuality completely transcends the categories of masculinity and femininity. If you can change your hair color at will, get rid of your hair altogether or replace it with something completely different, and you were born with all these potentials — then what is the point of asking whether you are blond or brunette? Similarly, you do not ask about the gender of the post-sexual.”

Only now did a truly awkward silence fall. Adam began to wonder whether it wouldn’t be better to return to Francis for a few minutes, instead of...

”Stahs Judas McPherson apologizes for keeping you waiting, Stahs” Gheorg spoke up. Their tone suggested that Gheorg was continuing some earlier statement. Perhaps that was the case: after all, 99% of the information reached him through Plateau senses and there on the Plateau was where he truly lived. ”Since you have a moment — numerous invitations for Stahs Adam Zamoyski are constantly pouring into the Gnosis Fields.”

”I don’t know anyone. Maybe only those from the wedding... ”

”Oh, but everyone knows you, Stahs!”

Zamoyski exchanged significant glances with the Phoebe.

”So that’s it. They’re talking about me — do you have television here?”

”Your name has been mentioned many times during the Lodges’ deliberations, Stahs.”

”Well, I’m used to it. I survived the Wars, I will survive and gain universal glory.”

Again, the look carried more meaning than words. The Phoebe, with their hands behind their back and their torso forward, smiled knowingly.

“Who?” Zamoyski asked.

“Stahs Judas McPherson recommends to your attention a highly respected specialist who is an old friend of the clan and for whom you, Stahs, are the

subject of research. They would consider it an honor if you. . . ”

“A specialist in what? A cognitive scientist? Did you make my mind recordings available to you?”

“Not at all!”

“Judas wants me to meet with them?”

Gheorg shrugged.

“You have time, and if you can afford the courtesy, Stahs...”

“I understand that you are currently in contact with this specialist. A Phoebe too?”

“Yes. So? Should I redirect you?”

Zamoyski tore himself away from the wall, straightened himself, looked around the corridor — and bared his teeth in an evil smile.

”Fuck you.”

He expected disorientation again, or at least a reorientation of his senses. Meanwhile, for two heartbeats he was still standing in the castle corridor, in tense immobility, with Gheorg on his left hand. . .

. . . and with the third heartbeat he was already walking along the shore of the blue bay under the enormous ball of the sun. The sun hung so low overhead that it seemed that a strongly thrown stone would reach it.

It obscured two-thirds of the sky. The surface of the water seemed to bend under the deep curve of the sun, soft waves moved over the concave lens of the bay.

That Zamoyski had noticed this curve at all... He should have fallen with burnt pupils. He should have been burned to ash and plasma.

He instinctively crouched down and looked around for a shadow. Run! So close - even the smallest prominence... the sea would evaporate, the palm trees would burn, the white sand would glaze.

Meanwhile, the air was damp, barely warm, a cool breeze was blowing off

the water. It was in such a glaring contradiction to what he saw - a blazing star within arm's reach - that he had to close his eyes.

Now the smell should reach him too, sea, sweat and plant rot. But nothing. So he was spared the illusion of complementary simulations.

In the distance, someone was singing in an unknown language; birds were squawking closer.

"Stahs Zamoyski."

She was walking towards him from the row of beach gazebos, along a path made of symmetrical white stones. With one hand she was pushing back her faded hair, with the other she was holding out in greeting. She was so deeply tanned—to the deep black of roasted coffee beans—that it was only after shaking her hand that he realized that the woman was completely naked. However, her one hundred percent tan, her lack of pubic hair, and her animalistic ease of movement—all of this pushed her far beyond the erotic context; she was not naked.

"Słowiński" she introduced herself.

He bowed low.

"Phoebe."

"Stahs."

Should he kiss her hand?

She took him by the arm and led him toward the gazebos.

Until now, Adam had always manifested himself from an imagination originating in his phren; this was probably the rule of civilizational oes. So he was still wearing the worn-out clothes in which he had left Puermageze; now he also had a golden stain on his shirt—a memento of Francis' sweet juices.

He adjusted his pace to the woman's long, calm stride. Maybe it was just his imagination, but he felt the stones bend slightly under his feet. As if he were sinking the soles of his shoes into the material of the boulders.

"I'm supposed to be the subject of your scientific interest, Phoebe."

“Perhaps you’ll benefit from it.”

He raised an eyebrow. The woman lowered her head, letting her faded hair fall over her face. Zamoyski immediately thought of Angelica. Different hardware, same program.

“I’d be willing to pay for the right to freely re-index your Transfer Fields. You wouldn’t feel it, Stahs, you’d be using Plateau as before.”

“What is the purpose of these... re-indexes?”

She didn’t answer right away. They had sat down in the shade earlier. Since almost the entire sky was the sun, the shadow was concentrated only in tight, deeply hidden nodes, places protected from almost all sides. Zamoyski squeezed himself into the vertical cocoon of semi-darkness with relief.

Under the palm trees, invisible sprinklers were erecting structures of water and mist in the sun. The world shimmered grainily, medo-tuned, condemned to the sharpest colors.

The longer Zamoyski looked, the more certain he was that those water particles were staying in the air for far too long, their parabolas were too stretched, their fall too slow - and yet the gravity was no less than on Earth, he couldn’t feel the difference with his nanomatic body.

”It’s nice here.”

”Thank you.”

”I haven’t been able to complain about the lack of sun lately, though...”

Zamoyski ran his fingers through his thick beard, stretching his legs out in front of him,. The woman was sitting with her hands evenly placed on her thighs, straight; he caught her amused gaze. A dirty adventurer and a naked vestal. Well, yes. But what exactly did she want to communicate to him with her nakedness? He no longer had any illusions that anything here could have been accidental—she sees what she should see, hears what she should hear, thinks what...

He tugged at his mustache until tears stood in his eyes.

Naked — naked, that is, uncivilized; that is the first association. Savage.

Why did Słowiński want to cut herself off from the HS Civilization in my eyes?

”If it is not tactless...” Zamoyski muttered. ”You were not born a Phoebe, were you?”

”No, I come from the first third. I moved from the white to the Plateau as soon as it became possible. The details of my biography — oh, but you do not know how to use the Plateau yet, Stahs.”

”I will learn. I am just beginning to wonder... Have you been sending me invitations all this time, only I did not have access to... No. McPherson informed you that I had returned? No. Is it possible to recognize from the outside what is being litigated in other people’s Fields?”

”No.”

”It is not possible. Yes.”

They smiled at each other through the thick suspension of chiaroscuro.

“I am, by phren and profession, a metaphysicist,” Słowiński said. They lifted the shell lying on the ground with their manifestation and pressed it to the ear of the manifestation.

Adam bowed his head.

“For me, Phoebe, you are the Einstein of the twenty-ninth century.”

“Well, there really is a lot left to explain.” He pushed the shell aside and sighed. “You see, Stahs, the reason for the existence of Inclusions is the difference in the laws that govern them. The art of dekrafting spacetime is the art of constructing new physics. However, as you probably guessed, certain limitations apply here too.”

“The laws of changing laws.”

“Yes.”

With the manner of a cheap conjurer, they shook the conch and handed it to Adam. The shell turned out to be filled to the brim with small gemstones of various colors and variously cut.

”Please choose one. No. The only one.”

He hesitated, hand raised, fingers spread.

”That is precisely how metaphysics is done,” they said.

”What does that mean?”

”Blindly digging for treasures.”

A red ruby. He held it up to the sun, looked. Blood flooded his eyes. So tiny — and yet you can see, perpendicular facets, the shape of a prism. He put it in his pocket.

”The question we ask ourselves,” Słowiński said, ”is as follows: what do metaphysical constants actually represent? From what laws does this limitation of the time variable, so unfortunately baptized with my name, result? From what — Thievi’s Prohibition? Does metaphysical engineering create new Inclusions at all, or does it only use those that have always existed?”

Zamoyski shook the shell questioningly, the treasures spilled out onto the sand.

Słowiński’s Manifestation shook her head.

“No, no. These,” she pointed to the shell, “are the first, primitive associations. There is no such ’larger’ universe that would contain ours and all the Inclusions. There is no such superplaster, n-dimensional space, where n equals the number of selectable physics parameters and each point means one, specific inclusion. This is just an abstract simulation: the Thievi Chart. You, Stahs, cannot even see it with your three-dimensional senses, nor imagine it with your three-dimensional minds. One of the paradoxes of Progress is that practicing true metaphysics is only possible on Plateau, and you cannot create an Inclusion belonging to a Plateau without knowledge of metaphysics.”

“Hmm, I think I can imagine the Thievi Chart. Our universe is a point with coordinates corresponding to its physical constants. Right?”

“You have the definition of the Thievi Chart in your mind, not the Chart itself. Similarly, you understand what, for example, a seven-dimensional ’cube’ is, but you do not see it, you cannot create an image in your head. Yet the

Thievi Chart itself is only a logical construction, a model. Within this model we investigate deeper laws. We can make conclusions from partial data. We know, for example, that a specific segment of this imagined M-space — one could even say a monolithic block — consists exclusively of Plateaus belonging to individual Civilizations and Deformants, contemporary and former. We can guess the monolithicity of this block from the great difficulty with which it is today to establish any new Plateau. Even if it is already somewhat imperfect in terms of the speed of processing or the cost of Trans."

"Wait, is there a finite number of. . . "

"Oh, I'm sorry, Stahs. Thievi's Prohibition gives that for a given combination of metaphysical variables, only one Inclusion can be cut off."

Zamoyski rubbed the back of his neck.

"Hmm, but since we can dekraft things such as Saks, and En-Ports, Ports in Ports — I assume it's similar with Inclusions, right? — then by opening an Inclusion from an Inclusion from an Inclusion, we can nest in any Thievi Point as deeply as we want."

"Bravo! You've just discovered Prut's Proof, Stahs, one of the two exceptions to the Prohibition, for a given combination of metaphysical variables, only one first-degree Inclusion can be cut off."

"What's the second exception?"

"Oh, it concerns dormant physics, I won't dwell on it now, Stahs. These are theories — because in practice, metaphysical engineering shows that there is not much space here, all the best coordinates have been used. The block has a crystal structure. But exactly!" the woman laughed, clapped her hands.

"When I say 'block'" she whispered confidentially "am I talking about some entity like a galaxy, a nerve cell, a diamond or even an attractor — or am I just creating a convenient name for one of the random sets of data? This is a palm tree" she pointed to the palm tree "its trunk, leaves, fruit; I point to the parts, connect them and say, 'palm tree'. The palm tree exists. Now — she marked a square in the sand with the big toe of her left foot — I say that this piece of beach is an aracuotcha. What exactly would its aracuotchaness consist of? Did it exist as an aracuotcha before I named it? Did it exist at all, except as a piece

of beach?"

She leaned even closer to Zamoyski, her white hair falling over her eyes.

"Does the Block exist, Mr. Zamoyski? What do you think?"

"So this is a test. So this is an interrogation. Next in line for the draining of my memory."

He lowered his gaze to the square in the sand.

"Flows," he muttered. "These mysterious disturbances of the Plateau Fields, the random distortions of data."

He tried to remember what Angelica had told him about Flows. Judas' suspicions... the rumors... that during the attacks in Farstone...

Słowiński clapped their hands again.

"You're good," they whispered, straightening in response to involuntary admiration.

He wasn't fooled, it's a Phoebe.

"First-class intuition." They nodded and smiled knowingly. "An incredibly successful implementation; respect this hollow, Stahs."

"I intend to."

Słowiński raised their manifestation with a sigh, entered the water curtains, twirled it on their heel. They shook the drops from their hair and face, now, in contrast, even darker.

"I have created many Plateaus for purely research purposes," they spoke through the sound of the water, not looking at Adam, who was turning the shell still heavy with valuables in his fingers. "I record the Flows and analyze the correlations."

"Are there any?"

"Now there are." A few more pirouettes, then they returned to the gazebo, leaning against its wall. Silver drops of artificial dew densely incrusted the dark skin. "With you, Stahs Zamoyski."

He held her gaze.

”So I somehow cause them?” he snorted. ”These Flows. Yes, through the Block. Hmm?”

They waved their hand, openly irritated for the first time.

“Correlation is a very broad term, it says nothing about cause and effect. Nevertheless, the convergence is unmistakable.”

“Ah, that’s how you knew, Phoebe, that I had returned to the Plateau. The change in the pattern of the Flows indicated my appearance in the Gnosis Fields.”

“Yes.”

“And the right to re-index me.”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “That would allow me to refine the formula and test certain hypotheses. I would randomize these metastases—and the Flows would either react or not. You subjectively wouldn’t notice anything, Stahs, the auxiliary index would update the addresses on an ongoing basis, I guarantee full service.”

Randomize, exactly! That would allow you not only to refine the formula—it would allow you to control the Flows later, my dear Phoebe Słowiński.

“To tell you the truth,” they said aloud, “I have no idea what the Flows could possibly have to do with me. But well, I’m usually the last to find out about myself... Let’s assume it’s true. But to provoke the situation even more... to me that seems like a foolish risk, shaking a red rag in front of a bull.”

“Oh, so you also believe that he not only exists, but that he—reacts.”

“And you don’t?”

The Słowiński Manifestation rubbed her shoulders, as if suddenly chilled. She sat down on her heels against the wall of the gazebo.

Zamoyski wanted to cross his legs, but stopped himself.

The woman absently mixed the scattered gemstones with the sand.

“We call him the Suzerain,” they finally said. ”A spontaneous or artificial form of complex disorders of the Block. In the cross-section of a single Plateau, it is a contentless and purposeless collection of Flows of dense chaos — just as a two-dimensional cross-section of the brain shows only meaningless flashes on glia and neurons. But in the Block...”

They looked at him.

”What a hypothesis” he smacked his lips.

”Exactly.”

They smiled at each other in silent agreement.

Conflicting interests, different mentalities, unequal positions — and yet, sympathy. What an atmosphere had been created, a convention of reactions between them. That even if it was a fraud, a lie (because could he believe it?), even if it was a stab in the back — then also— with a half-smile and the certainty of a joke from the lips of the defeated. He did not dwell any longer on what kind of manifestation it was: biological, nanomatic, Plateau. The impression finally won.

The Phoebe, Zamoyski thought, is a human being; they are a man, without a doubt. Something more, certainly; but also a man, he contains humanity in himself. Probably in the same way as a logical Inclusion contains a phoebe and the ultimatum inclusion contains everything.

Since I have already fallen into the world of such a paradigm, I must live according to it; live, think. Up! To the Plateau!

Would the contract with Slovinski give me enough money to buy my own Plateau Fields, so that I would no longer depend on the Gnosis OES, their hospitality and their Patrick Gheorgs?

He asked the manifestation about this.

“I can sell you a whole Plateau,” they replied. “Almost as good as the *Homo Sapiens* Civilization.”

“Fields on its Plateau would satisfy me.”

“No problem.”

"How long would this agreement be valid?"

"It is negotiable. First of all, the only thing that would matter is the time of your actual presence on Plateau. I would also insist on the possibility of extension. The basic period would be a megapentine."

"What?"

"It is a measure of a-time."

"All this fun sometimes. . . "

"I see. It can be a bit disorienting for a twenty-first-century Stahs."

"Here, I suppose" Zamoyski waved at the sky/sun "that we are not relativized."

"You would. The speed of your perception and reaction, Stahs, is limited by the laws of your biological realization. If you were here, not just a manifestation *via* Plateau, that would be different — a phren in a hollow would process it just as fast. But is that it?"

"But this is your Port, Phoebe?"

"For the record, it is not a Port, but an Inclusion. Complete cut-off..." He blinked.

"Well, that explains the damn sun. What can you expect from a metaphysics genius, eh? You messed around with the rules a bit, didn't you? However, it would probably be more convenient to meet directly on the Plateau, in some sensory constructs..."

"Let's say I'm a bit. . . "

"What's going on?"

"We have a guest. An Osca."

This last one was already directed at the column of dust that had broken through the curtains of water mist and was just configuring itself before the eyes of the manifestation of Słowiński and Zamoyski in the form of a young woman in a long sari, with a multitude of gold and silver bracelets on her arms, a bright

diamond in her nostril.

“Stahs Adam Zamoyski” Słowiński introduced em. ”Osca Tutankhamun, an independent open Inclusion.”

Not knowing how to behave, Zamoyski, just in case, behaved as politely as possible, he stood up, bowed, gently took the outstretched hand and kissed it.

When he straightened up, the mood was already different. Both female manifestations jumped to opposite poles of behavior: Słowiński — they glared at the Indian woman; Tutankhamunu — looked from under half-dropped eyelids with ostentatious contempt, both for the Phoebe and the Stahs.

If the Phoebe and the Inclusion were manifested more broadly, the water particles sprayed in the air would probably freeze in flight.

Something had happened, Zamoyski realized. In that split second when I wasn’t looking. Because there, on the Plateau, in the Inclusions and the Słowiński Ports — it was hours, days, maybe years. Maybe millennia.

Another column of dust pierced the misty screens. No one said anything anymore. Adam also waited in silence, having only retreated into the shadows. He desperately tried to remember what Angelica and Gheorg had told him about the Plateau’s service. If he called out loud now, Patrick, would the information about the summons reach Secretary McPherson in the Farstone stage? What are the mudras for leaving the Plateau? Had Angelica even shown him any? What was going on here?

The air was congealing in the frost of bitter hatred.

A short Asian man in Chinese clothing solidified from the second vortex. Zamoyski recognized him, it was he who had struck his forehead against the terrace floor before Gheorg after the murder of Judas. The imperial mandarin — is that it?

Everyone was looking at Zamoyski.

“Out of concern for Civilization” the manifestation of Tutankhamun spoke up. “Adam Zamoyski: you are not a human being. You are not a human being. You are not a human being.”

“I heard” the Mandarin said.

“I heard” Słowiński’s manifestation said.

“Phoebe” the Inclusion’s manifestation bowed. “Your Highness.”

Then e crumbled into dust and ashes — the wind blew em away, the artificial dew washed em away.

“It sounded almost like a challenge to a duel” Zamoyski laughed with effort.

“It was a challenge to a duel” Słowiński’s manifestation declared and kicked the dropped shell up to the palm trees. She had bruised her foot in the process and was now hopping on one leg, furious — such was the semi-comic behavior she was displaying to Adam and the Emperor.

“Stahs” the Mandarin turned to Zamoyski “the Grand Lodge would like to meet with you at the earliest convenient time. My respects. Good luck. The Emperor will be watching.”

And they too departed into oblivion.

Having sat down heavily and leaned against the wall of the gazebo, Adam looked reproachfully at the dark-skinned woman.

“Have mercy” he groaned “this is some fucking kabuki. The kingdom for a prompter!”

“My fault” Słowiński admitted. “I let Tutankhamun in without your consent, Stahs. But e knew about you in advance and has never used such tactics before; e has never challenged anyone. E presented a different purpose for his arrival, e lied to me. Nevertheless, I admit that it is my fault.”

“A moment ago you claimed that no one knows about me except you and those from Gnosis. And what the hell kind of duel?!”

“Who can penetrate the thoughts of an Inclusion...?” the Phoebe’s manifestation declaimed. “Who can measure eir power? It’s up the Curve from me. Maybe some Wells of Time... And the duel... well, you belong to Civilization. Archive yourself beforehand; the Lodge wouldn’t forgive you, Stahs. Apparently I’m not the only one who notices the Emperor’s interest in you. The Flows to the Plateau of the Four Progresses have intensified recently. Yet you’re already

a public figure, Stahs. Besides, from what I hear, the Deformants will be paid well for your current manifestation. Yes, yes, please don't be surprised, it has spread, it had to; the race to your hollow is on. So, shall we nail down the deal? Call the Emperor back?"

"I don't understand any of this!" Zamoyski cried in despair, clutching his head.

"That speaks well of you. You are a human being. Whatever Tutankhamun might say."

"Oh, yes, that sounds proud. A human being! The filth of Progress."

"Have you thought about it?"

"Do you realize what it looks like from my side?"

"I can guess."

"Well, yes, you probably do those, what's their name, phrenium models for me in real time."

"You also compose them in your heads, constantly, in front of each of your interlocutors, Stahs. The only difference is that you do it subconsciously."

"You don't have a subconscious?"

"I can only speak for myself."

"And?"

They smiled.

"I reserved some Buffer Fields for her."

He stood up.

"Do I have to answer now?"

Słowiński's Manifestation spread her arms.

"In that case, how else can I communicate with you, Phoebe?"

"You know the address and the key; I'll give you the access code."

“The thing is, I don’t really... I don’t even have my own Fields, I’m passing through Gnosis’.”

“Yes. It’s inconvenient,” they admitted.

Zamoyski waited in silence.

They wagged her finger reproachfully, but already half-smiling.

“Okay. Let it be an advance payment. A deposit. Besides, I’m flattered by your trust. Usually parents do that.”

“What?”

“They select and configure the children’s OES. Here you go.”

She ran through the fog curtains and returned with a conch. She handed it to Zamoyski.

He accepted the empty conch cautiously.

“Should I do something about it?” he frowned.

”I bought you a spherical decimeter of the Homo Sapiens Civilization Plateau. Addressed by THIS THORN IS FROM THE TREE I’VE PLANTED. Remember it. Change your implant’s default settings now?”

”I’ll leave the Gnosis Fields?”

”Yes.”

”I previously manifested in Sol-Port and...”

”The Imperial assignments will be remembered. There will be a shift of all resources. Besides, the Emperor has to confirm it anyway; hear your confirmation, record your will, Stahs. So — do you confirm?”

”Yes.”

He nodded to Słowiński’s manifestation.

”Done.”

The Emperor listened.

Zamoyski lifted the shell.

"What is it for?"

"Temporary interface icon. I bought you the most popular, basic version, without any modifications; you can check."

"I believe it."

He put the shell to his ear. It was humming. Shhhhhhh... swishh... talk-talk-talk-talk...

"Advance payment?" Adam smiled. "I don't think so, Phoebe Słowiński. I bet these Fields are very far from the Fields of Gnosis. So either way, you'll find out if anything moves in the Block."

"I didn't have any..."

Adam waved his hand.

"I like your perversity better than Judas's anyway."

He brought the shell to his lips.

"Farstone."

He saw the manifestation fold her arms across her tanned chest and bow her head, half-smiling; a curtain of straw-colored hair fell.

In the library of Farstone Castle, a servant in red and black livery was lighting the gas lamps. He looked back at Zamoyski having blown out a long match.

"The gentlemen are already coming down" he said, then bowed and left, quietly closing the door behind him.

"Emperor" Adam whispered to the conch.

The Mandarin appeared immediately, as if a switch had been turned on; there was no elegance in it. The manifestation from Plateau, Zamoyski realized. It does not use nanomats, pure OVR.

"I request a private conversation."

“Of course.”

“Gheorg... Is Gnosis cut off?”

“Yes.”

“Do we even have to come here?”

“As you wish, Stahs.” The Mandarin hid his hands in his sleeves. “I invite you to the Imperial Gardens.”

Zamoyski nodded in acceptance and only then...

Readdressing.

Usually it took a few to a dozen or so seconds (necessary for the configuration of nanomats to the shape of the manifestation), but this time it went like a lightning bolt. Flash - here stands Adam under a plane tree in the corner of a green labyrinth, black sky above him, white mass of an enormous building in front of him, on the ground four of his shadows, moving. Where the light comes from, he doesn’t have to check - and if he did raise his head, nuclear heat-birds would blind him for long minutes.

Below, however, in the Gardens, apart from Zamoyski and the Mandarin, there was no one there – Zamoyski himself did not notice anyone there. Yet he knew well that crowds of millions were pouring through the public Plateau Fields, through this AR construct was protected by the Emperor’s strongest protocols. But these were millions of Phoebes and Inclusions, Slowinskis fast as neutrinos (ping! – there was, there is, there is not, flew through the Plateau). Most probably do not visualize themselves at all, contenting themselves with the osmosis of naked data.

“So I am a full-fledged citizen of Civilization,” said Zamoyski.

“*De jure* – yes,” the Mandarin bowed his head. “De facto – you will be a Stahs only from the moment the identifying sequence is imprinted in the DNA of your biological realization, the current hollow.”

“I understand. Could you swap my Fields for others of similar capacity and move my resources, transfer paths and all the rest there? Cover the necessary operating costs from the difference in Field sizes.”

"Of course. Any specific location?"

"No. Random. Already?"

"Yes. Indexed as I'M GUIDED BY THE BIRTHMARK ON MY SKIN."

"Thank you. Delete my OES. That is — swap it for the third most popular version among Stahs, preserving the configuration."

"Source of financing?"

"Oh Jesus" Adam groaned, already slightly irritated by the procedural celebration, "you don't have shareware here? There are some free basic versions, right?"

"I would just like to point out that this type of thing is usually handled in a slightly different way. My function..."

Zamoyski took a deep breath.

"Please forgive me. You are certainly aware of the, um, discomfort of my situation." Adam looked away, leaning his shoulder against the trunk of the plane tree. "I don't even know how I should address you. I am talking to the Emperor, his demon, some *talk-bot*, AI, to whom?"

"The Emperor is listening; I am the Emperor, but the Emperor is not me. I exist to serve."

"Who?"

"Civilization."

"Specifically?"

"I am simplifying it to the Grand Lodge."

"I understand that the Grand Lodge is made up of the Small Lodges."

"It includes their representatives: the Lodge of Stahs, Phoebes, Inclusions."

"So is it in their power, for example, to extract the content of this conversation from you?"

"No. This is the basis of the trust of all signatories of the Foundation Agreement: the structure of my phren can be changed, but the data I possess cannot be used against individual signatories."

Adam recalled the scene on the terrace in Farstone, when the Mandarin had bowed to Gheorg. Zamoyski had been standing there, watching them, listening intently to the rapid dialogue—like a peasant eavesdropping on the details of the secret games of the aristocracy.

"I therefore have the right to call you at any time, to ask a question, to demand service."

"You are a citizen of Civilization, Stahs. Read the Foundation."

"I will have to..." Zamoyski muttered. "Very well. Find me a star that meets the following conditions. About four and a half thousand light years distant from Earth... that is from the original location of Earth..."

"I apologize, but I must inform you, Stahs, that all objects that make up the Milky Way galaxy, all matter..."

"Oh, yes, yes, I know" Zamoyski sighed.

Crossing his legs, he sat cross-legged on the highly elevated roots of the tangled one.

"Find it in the archives."

"I'm listening."

"Four thousand and characteristics falling within the following ranges..."

"Yes?"

Hakata, Hakata. What did Sok say? It went something like this...

Before he could curse in his mind, he was already standing in the ruins of the terrace of a Roman villa and reaching for the nonexistent exhibit, the shadow of the Moon breaking on the piled-up rubble. The shadow of Zamoyski and — the shadow of a man with a sword, just raised to strike above Adam's head.

He jumped back with a cry. The blade whistled, he caught a silver arc out

of the corner of his eye, an afterimage of a cut. He stumbled, fell, stood up. An Asian man was running at him, the blade was drawn back in line from his collarbone, ready for a lightning-fast bite.

Zamoyski jumped behind a mangled column, almost tripping on his own feet. The swordsman was checking him from the other side. Are there more of them here? Adam looked around quickly. He didn't see anyone, but there were enough shadows to hide half a platoon of ninjas.

The assassin didn't say a word, because that wasn't his job. He was attacking — trying to kill.

Zamoyski bit his lip.

Plateau! Imperial Gardens! Now!

...What the hell?

Plateau! I'm not here!

...

He was still there.

He was sweating all over. Stuck in his own memory! The assassin jumped around the column, sending jab after jab at Zamoyski. Schizophrenia - that's an understatement.

Fang! Francis! Angelica!

Nothing. Just the swish of the blade, louder and louder, closer and closer.

He jumped off the terrace, ran towards the pond. The swordsman was chasing after him, Zamoyski could hear the rustle of his movements in the silence of the night.

What the fuck is going on here? This yellow man will catch up with me soon! A gun! I can have a gun too!

They were already among the willows - he turned left, ran around the trunk, bent down and picked up his saber.

He was panting heavily, the deadly sprint had poured cold lead into the veins

of his legs. He barely had time to raise his hand and block the cut, bringing it down the blade onto the crossguard.

The Asian man immediately twisted away, going in an arc to the left and now cutting horizontally. Zamoyski parried clumsily, the saber was heavy, his hand was numb, he was swaying on his feet, wheezing loudly, his lungs screaming for oxygen; and the Asian man cut and cut and cut.

He'll chop me to pieces! I don't have the faintest idea about fencing!

As soon as he thought that, he got hit under the ribs, a long cut from below from the left. He screamed out of breath. He flew back, hit the trunk with his back. It stung like hell, he could also feel the wetness of blood.

The yellow man was charging, a dozen hands, a hundred swords, a fucking kendo mantis. Eyes blinded by the flashes of moonlight reflected by the slightly curved blade of the katana.

Adam gritted his teeth. I'm the best swordsman in the world! I eat Musashi for breakfast! Assholes like that are left-handed...

Thwupp!

The blade entered two-thirds of its length, splitting the Asian man's skull and sinking somewhere in the brain mass. The corpse rolled its eyes and fell to its knees; then it slumped to the side. The hilt of the saber thudded against the stone.

Zamoyski sat up with an empty sigh. His wounded side tore at him, a streak of fire running from his ribs to his hip. He was so tired that his vision was even worse: shadows dissolved into a gray mist, long-haired willows covered the entire horizon, above them the Moon spread in an oval puddle across the starry sky; but he also guessed at those stars more than he saw them. Only the cold, damp wind he experienced with one hundred percent clarity — and with each gust of it he reasoned more clearly.

But what does the power of your own imagination mean...! I could have shot him like the others, I could, I could. But since he jumped out with that samurai sword, I had to swing my saber, Volodyovsky by God's grace. That wound...

He unbuttoned his shirt, examined the cut. It didn't look good, the blade

must have caught on some artery.

He looked away. There's no wound! I'm healthy! I'm completely healthy and rested!

He stood up and picked up the katana. Of course, it fit very well in his hand.

He waved once, twice.

"Now," he said aloud, "I'll cut the night and go to the Imperial Gardens."

He cut.

Nothing.

Furious, he threw the katana into the pond. It splashed.

"Autistic, damn what I've come to do in my old age..."

He glanced back at the ruins.

Despite everything, they looked incredibly picturesque, even after being devastated again. There was an undeniable charm in the line of their shadow, a gentle beauty in the composition of the massif...

"What now? Durenne didn't teach such double nelsons."

Besides, the devil knows. Memory is in ruins anyway. What is left is stone on stone, fallen pillars.

Maybe fall asleep? If I fall asleep here... there's a chance I'll wake up one floor above.

Or even better; forget about myself. Since there's no dreamer - who will see this falling star? who will appreciate the smell of the night? who will hear the roar of water?

The water roared, flowing from the black body of the monster, behind Adam's back, rising from the depths of the pond.

Zamoyski turned around and his jaw dropped.

The beast was five times bigger than Smaug. When it opened its mouth

(which it did immediately with an impressive roar), he could count its teeth, each bigger than a pike.

What is this supposed to be? Am I suicidal? Am I tormented by some subconscious suicidal mania...?

Freudosaurus, on the other hand, did not contemplate psychological connections, but shook off the rest of the water and jumped at Adam.

The monster was truly terrifying, especially in motion, especially when it rushes straight at you; the scenography straight from a Gothic horror film also did its job. No wonder Zamoyski was filled with fear, and that heavy fear, bound by cold phlegm, which binds his limbs and enslaves his mind.

"He'll kill me!" thought Adam. He understood that in this case the monster would indeed destroy him without fail.

A split second before the gigantic body of the beast fell on him, overtaken by a whirlwind of fire and a wave of hot air, he managed to shout in his mind "I am immortal!"

He believed it. In the roar of the beast, in the hurricane of flames, in the tornado of sand - he managed to arouse a clear and simple conviction of his own immortality in himself. He was immortal.

Therefore, no Freudosaurs, no matter how powerful, were able to harm him. The monster's blow threw him back several dozen meters. Zamoyski groaned when he hit the ground, but immediately stood up, dusted himself off, straightened up.

So there was no reason to be scared either.

"Kitty-kitty!" he shouted at the dragon. "Kitty-kitty!"

The beast knelt down, stretched its paws, yawned, stretched...

"Kitty, kitty, good kitty."

The beast waved its tail (destroying the Roman villa completely), then closed its eyes — fell asleep.

Very nice, Zamoyski sighed inwardly, only I still don't know how to get out

of this catatonic delusion.

“Emperor!” he shouted. “Emperor!”

Nothing.

Apparently in reality — there, outside; or rather: in another layer of the interior; damn, I got lost in myself — there it clearly doesn’t scream.

He returned to the pond.

After the monster’s spectacular emergence, the banks of the reservoir shifted a little, the pond spread out in a muddy pool right up to the willows and Zamoyski had to wade through this still constant suspension of mud and algae. Having reached the edge of clean water, he stopped and waited until its surface smoothed out again, which took a long time.

Now he could look himself in the eye, look into his face, search his features for signs of betrayal.

Of course, it was an irrational reflex, a sorcery and downright magic. If he believed in it...

“Who are you?” he asked sharply. “What do you want from me?”

Nothing will come of it. The image in the water obediently reflected all of Zamoyski’s grimaces and froze in stillness when Zamoyski froze; never by itself. Nothing will come of it.

However, Adam stared at his own face almost hypnotically. The stubble hid most of his face, it was impossible to guess the line of his lips, the shape of his chin. Squinted eyes, furrowed brows. The reflection rippled in the patch of moonlight, according to the rhythm of the flow of wrinkles - sometimes more gloomy and menacing, sometimes more relaxed. Anger - calm - anger - calm - anger:

“Die! Die! Perish, you and Narva! She’s gone, she’s gone, she’s gone!”

It wasn’t very loud, the sound came from the water, as if it were coming from the mouth of the reflection, muffled from the beginning. Adam had no doubts, however, that Zamoyski/the pond would scream all this with naked, animal fury, as loudly as he could.

“Who are you?”

To which the Zamoyski from the pond replied:

“You know. Suzerain! Suzerain! Suzerain! I grind you to dust! Die! Die! Die-d ... Suzerain, the spider of inter-Inclusion surges, spontaneous Trans, the hypothetical consciousness of the Block, the homeostat of the all-plateau, metaphysical life. Słowińskis, of course — so generations ahead — and with each planck, further and further. The Father of Flows — or maybe...Flows is he? What exactly did Słowiński say?”

It is always the hardest to recall the literal content; one remembers mainly the meanings. But the meanings are my own, not the interlocutor’s. This Suzerain, here, in the pond — is also mine. Mine, mine, mine.

Where does he even come from in my Palace of Memory? Probably through the Plateau, from these Flows. Because can one recognize a Flow that is entirely contained in one Field and is subtle enough not to change the energy/information balance — can even the Emperor then perceive it? Along with the basic file, one can also manipulate copies, auxiliary indexes, checksums — for the Suzerain, it makes no difference. All this is his blood, his nerve impulses.

Let’s move on. This happens every time I enter Plateau - that attack of the Patrick Gheorgs, now the Asian and the Freudosaurus. (He invariably uses manifestations from my most recent associations. Heck, he could even shout his name to me only when I heard it from Słowiński!) However, falsifying the archives is out of the question, because after all I was not imprinted in the meantime into new blocks. Something else, then. What? Are manipulations at such a deep level of phren permitted within the Plateau-brain-Plateau data transfer protocol? But what could the Suzerain have changed here that I am unable to escape from my own Palace of Memory? After all, theoretically it would be enough for me to open my eyes.

Or maybe I do have them open - there, under the plane tree, in the Imperial Gardens?

One must penetrate to the layer that controls motor skills. The body. Muscles. Imagine them.

I open my eyes. I open my eyes. (He closed them here, by the pond, for this

purpose.) I lift my eyelids. Come on! The face is mine! My facial muscles! I can feel them! Up! Yes! (He believed). Yes, yes!

And indeed, he lifted them.

He sat down in amazement. The deep armchair welcomed him with a quiet sigh of black leather.

Someone looked through the half-open door and immediately Patrick Gheorg, Judas, Angelica and Moetle and two more people entered the library, a man and a woman unknown to Zamoyski.

Adam tried to find some adequate way of behaving, but the confusion of styles, aesthetics and even logic was too great. At first, just like in Słowiński's gazebo, he wanted to cross his legs, but he realized that on his high boots and on his trousers, which were torn along the seams, there was a thick layer of mud from the pond, which had been splashed by the Freudosaurus. Water was dripping from Zamoyski and soaking into the burgundy carpet. When he ran his hand over the armrest, he left wet traces on the wood.

In the end, he counted the buttoning of the shirt with a dispassionate expression on his face, slit at the ribs, as a success.

While the others were settling into armchairs along the walls, Gheorg introduced the strangers to Zamoyski:

"Phoebe Stern of the Office. And Osca Ivonne Cress, the highest Gnosis Inclusion."

"The Emperor?"

Moetle raised a finger and smiled knowingly.

"The Emperor is listening."

The phrase was so smooth in his mouth that Zamoyski easily guessed the centuries-old meanings hidden behind those two words. Truly the Emperor is listening.

Stern of the Office was in a black three-piece suit, tightly hugging onto a thin manifestation of the male sex. A skull as bald as a knee, a nose like a coral crest, a black beard — probably a standard temporary nanomat, straight from

the aesthetic template.

Because they sat down right next to Zamoyski, Adam leaned over the railing to address them — as a consequence, this inevitably slid them both into confessional conventions, gestures and semi-familiar associations.

Zamoyski touched Stern's elbow.

"Who put a price on my head and why?" he asked, neither raising nor lowering his voice. "How much am I worth?"

Angelica caught up. She slapped her brother on the shoulder.

"Moetle...!"

The other man spread his arms.

"What? Definitely not me. You were asleep anyway."

Phoebe Stern folded their hands over their stomach, lowered their eyelids. (A manifestation describes a behavior).

"We have traced the information back to the deep Deformants," they said, starting on a low note, "and everything indicates that the order first appeared on a certain defective Plateau of unaffiliated Deformants. However, the a-time intervals separating the successive publications of the order on the increasingly popular Plateau of Deformation are very small; a cause-and-effect relationship does not seem likely to us. Of course, we can identify many of the signatories of these orders. Most of them possess or are associated with possessors of the Time Well, either explicit or presumed. Which strengthens the original diagnosis of the Office based on cross-prophecies from our Wells. Stahs Zamoyski fell victim to a classic Heinlein contralogy."

"That is how it is with the reliability of data from the Well," Judas interjected. "Prophecies about prophecies about prophecies about prophecies, *ad infinitum*... but the actions have already been taken and what is to be fulfilled in the future is coming true."

"Wait a minute...!" Zamoyski snorted. "There is a price on my head, because information from the future has been read, that information from the future will be read, that information from the future will be read..."

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“...that everyone there will hunt me for this prize?”

“You have made history, Adam” Angelica laughed, breaking the grimace of pain with which she was massaging her calf (she had a cramp as soon as she sat down). “If I am not mistaken, this is only the third recorded Heinlein contralogy.”

“What does that mean, that I have made history?” Zamoyski got irritated. (Irritation is always a safe reaction.) “I’m still alive, damn it!”

More quietly:

“In any case, I intend to stick to that version.”

To Judas, sarcastically:

“Mr. McPherson, I should probably thank you for buying my citizenship. Just a small question: could I be challenged to a duel as a non-citizen?”

Everyone obviously knew about Tutankhamun, for he saw no surprise on any face; only Angelica grimaced even more.

“It would be good” Judas muttered “if I had the power to bend the independent Inclusions from Tutankhamun’s heights of the Curve to my own plans.”

“Time is running out” Cress interjected. (Indeed, for the Slowinskis this exchange of views must have lasted millennia.) “We should deal with problems in order of threat, starting with the most immediate in time. So we learn that you were intercepted by a Kraftoid Deformant from the second third, a causative decivilization Slavinski. We are monitoring the course of the auction through non-progressive agents...”

Zamoyski only smiled at this - but in reality a current ran down his spine and hot blood rushed to his head. So after all! That fucking Deformant...! A trick and a trap! He was selling them! At this very moment - he was selling them!

“...and I think we will be able to buy you out, Stahs. However, only one can win the auction and that was clear from the beginning, so regardless of the bargaining, each interested party sent Fangs after you to seize by force. Normally

we would be able to calculate whether our cubic octagonal would arrive first, but in the current circumstances... Stahs!"

Zamoyski's hand finally hit the shell. He raised it to his lips and, without taking his eyes off Cress, whispered venomously:

"Francis."

He blinked: gold poured into his pupils. Golden light, divine radiance, the woolly aura of the internal organs of the Kraftoid... Again that brightness, all-encompassing, striking from every side. Shadow is another kind of blinding.

Because in front of his face, at a shallow breath, at a tilt of his head, he had the meniscus of a large drop and all the light striking his eyes had the consistency, color and power of liquid gold.

He looked around; he grabbed a leaf and turned in the air. He did not see Angelica in this navy-gold thicket, overgrowing all directions of orientation - but he saw her four-meter, convex shadow, stretched on an irregularly quivering bubble of white liquid. The bubble drifted slowly above Zamoyski's head.

The lady is swimming. He wanted to call her - still furious - but he noticed a scattered swarm of insectomats, falling in a spiral among the blue flowers - and he came to his senses, the words returned to the depths of his throat, the rage gave way to fear.

Stupid! You are inside em, e reads your moods, desires, instincts, thoughts almost - from the tension of your muscles, the trembling of your vocal cords, the temperature of your skin, the rhythm of your breathing, the pounding of your heart, the rush of blood in your veins and tissues. How did e know then that you were looking for a urinal? Nothing escapes em. You remain completely in the grip of power. You are unable to pass on a single word to Angelica without him knowing about it.

What was the point of returning from the Plateau at all? Idiot! Why, maybe you could throw it in Francis's face that he is a cunning kidnapper, a liar, a trader in live goods?

Here a mocking sarcasm awakens in Zamoyski: Why not? I will challenge him to a duel!

Although, by God and truth, the Deformant has not actually said a single word of falsehood. You didn't say where you came from before the Wars, where you were going and why. Perhaps Francis was lying about being cut off from his Plateaus - but Adam can't be sure of that either. Who knows whether such kidnapping and auctioning off victims doesn't fit into contemporary customs, whether there aren't some conventions that apply here too... Everything is possible.

Repeat this to yourself often and with faith. Everything is possible, everything is possible.

Zamoyski rubbed his neck. Yes, it was stupid. Anger shouldn't have had access to me. I'm too small to be angry at anyone or anything here.

How do I get back now? They're waiting for me there, in Farstone. Francis is watching; Francis is listening; Francis is crawling over my skin and getting into my throat, into my veins.

The Deformant certainly knows that the Wars no longer block the Plateau - but does he know that I have direct access to the HS Plateau?

Just to be on the safe side, Zamoyski yawned and stretched. He instinctively pulled his knees into a semi-fetal position. Something pricked his thigh. He put his hand in the pocket of his dirty, bloody trousers. A shell!

He resisted the impulse to clench his hand around the OVR phantom. Instead, he lowered his eyelids and calmed his breathing.

A shell: so the program was still working. Adam hadn't cut himself off from Plateau, he had merely redirected himself. That is, he had withdrawn from the manifestation. The OES was still working in his Fields.

Slowly moving his fingers along the smooth inner surface of the conch, Zamoyski traced the primitive outline of a dragon's silhouette in his pocket. Hadn't he seen a dragon in the McPherson coat of arms, back then, on the staircase of Farstone Castle? Plateau's management programs should be sufficiently implicit and redirect him back to the library...

Gravity. Light — his eyes were open, although he didn't lift his eyelids. A white phoenix flew over his head. It smelled of hot spring.

He stood up from under the plane tree, dusting off his trousers.

The Emperor rose from the puddle of stars.

“What are these conditions, Stahs?”

“In a moment.” He held out his hand with the shell to the mandarin. “How can I control this so that the body doesn’t respond to the commands, that is — the biological manifestation?”

“By resetting the connection network on the cerebral cortex. New connections with axons and neuroglia will open, according to the selected scheme. It could be anything.”

“What, for example?”

The Mandarin shrugged.

“A second pair of hands. An immaterial mouth. A tail. A full double receptorium. Anything. The stage manager will describe it to you, Stahs.”

“I don’t really have time. I would like to leave the manager open in OVR and ask without reflections in the body and manifestations — but I will not bother with manual tuning now. What is the most popular choice?”

“This version? Anima.”

“Fire me up.”

“You grant me, Stahs, permission to directly alter the contents of your Fields.”

“Only for the purpose of fulfilling this order.”

“Yes.”

The Emperor stepped closer to Adam.

“Please sit down.”

Zamoyski sat down again under the plane tree.

“This will no longer be needed” said the Mandarin and took the shell from

Adam.

He threw it into the pool in which the Milky Way burned. A short wave passed through the near arm of the galaxy. (Artistic Kraft, Adam smiled inwardly).

The Emperor's manifestation grabbed his robes, wrapped them around his knees, and knelt down opposite Zamoyski, on the shore of starry blackness.

"Do you feel it, Stahs?" he asked, looking at him searchingly.

"What?"

"That."

Adam tilted his head, biting his mustache.

"No."

But he already knew he was telling a lie.

The mandarin noticed his confusion.

"Breath. Please breathe. Breath, breath, breath."

He breathed. My God, he BREATHED! He had lungs, but he also had LUNGS. He felt the air and FELT the air. It scratched him on the palate and in his windpipe — this one and THAT one. If back then, in the ruins of the Palace of Memory, it had been schizophrenia of the mind — now he was experiencing schizophrenia of the body.

He was splitting.

"Deeply."

Deeply, deep, to the very core of the spine, to the nucleus of every nerve cell.

A sharp cut along the dendrites: splat! — and here are two Zamoyskis: /Zamoyski and //Zamoyski, and both of them are sitting here and staring into the empty space above Escher's House of the Emperor.

"Now focus solely on your anima, Stahs."

//Zamoyski stood up, straightened himself. He looked down at the kneeling Mandarin. He turned and looked at himself — at /Zamoyski — at the first manifestation that did not stand up, did not straighten up, did not turn around. It looked from under the tangled eyes of wide open ones.

He felt dizzy. He escaped //him with his gaze from his primus. However, even when //he looked in the same direction as he did — at the Mandarin — //he was looking from a different place, from a different angle. So //look superimposed on /look, both pressing images into the same brain: Zamoyski /saw and //saw. /He saw and //saw, /he heard and //heard, /he felt and //felt — the disorientation grew with every second, he was drowning in the chaos of excess stimuli. He will soon start /thinking and //thinking — then Adam Zamoyski will finally die, torn in two.

The structure of the mind does not change as quickly as the structure of the connectional nanoware. You cannot pump two liters of sensory impressions into a one-liter phrenium; the vessel will burst.

He was forced to squeeze his eyelids shut, both pairs of them. However, the duplicated tactile perceptor could not be profiled so easily, and Zamoyski — not any of his manifestations, but: Zamoyski — felt that in a moment the fuse in his brain responsible for the limit of transfer of stimuli would pop; that something would burn out there, the flame would jump from neuron to neuron, until the fire of madness engulfed everything.

“How to shut it down?!”

He shouted //Zamoyski, but the Emperor heard him. The Mandarin raised his head, caught the panicked gaze of //Zamoyski.

“The essence of such augmentation software is not to shift the perceptor and create an out-of-body manifestation, because that always happens when you use the Plateau” the Asian man said calmly “but to manage in them parallel. People do not live in multitasking mode; people inhabit only one manifestation at a time throughout their lives– their biological hollow.” The Mandarin struck the ground in front of //Zamoyski. “You are no longer a Stahs of the Fourth Tradition.”

“What are you saying...?”

"You have moved upwards along the Curve of Progress, Stahs."

//Zamoyski waved his hands; along with the energy, he released madness. Madness like an itching of the whole body: the surface of the skin and the interior of the organs; both bodies.)

He looked back at /Zamoyski, still kneeling motionless opposite the mandarin.

The instinct programmed into the phren fulfilled the role of an instruction manual. Adam jumped up to his primary and pushed his fingers into his eye sockets, ears, nostrils, mouth, inside his head...

He sighed with relief. Again, the stimuli flowed in a single stream. The surface of thoughts was smoothing out and the panicky anger, Zamoyski's first reaction to any threat: rage fueled by fear, was fading away.

He noticed a discreet smile on the Mandarin's face. (But if he noticed it at all, it was not discreet.)

"What you just did, Stahs," said the Emperor, answering an unasked question, "was simply switching from one manifestation to another. I would advise returning to the primary manifestation, especially since Gnosis and the Office are asking about your whereabouts right now.

"Tell them I'll be there in five minutes. K-time, of course."

"They asked you first, not me. They reported to your Fields, Stahs. You would hear their questions through your anima's ears - see through their eyes, experience their perceptor. Questions, information, worlds, lives. Just as you set the filters."

"Okay. So how do I answer them?"

"So that's what you want to spend these five minutes on, Stahs?"

"The phoenix was diving toward the fountain and the anima blinked, blinded. On the other hand, the disconnected secundus didn't even flinch. At least the vegetative nervous system reacts in a biological void - the abandoned manifestation of AR must have special programs for that..." //Zamoyski shook his head.

Where should I turn my attention? The needle of the fear compass was spinning madly.

He swallowed simulated saliva through his simulated throat.

Francis. Suzerain. Bounty hunters. *Octagons*[3].

What else?

"No. You're right. Now just three things." Zamoyski raised his //hand and counted on //fingers. "Special Stage Manager. Transfer Management. Star. Execute."

The Emperor executed.

THE primary manifestation of Stahs Adam Zamoyski welcomed Stahs Moetle and Phoebe Patrick Gheorg McPherson and Osca Cress and Phoebe Scern in the chambers in the Imperial House.

Zamoyski rented them on Tpentyn, paying again with the area of his Fields. As was to be expected, Słowiński assigned him an absurdly vast area, arranging Adam's transfer Fields in the maximum dispersion, in order to have the largest possible tarpaulin for that metaphysical bull. (After all, them wanted to sell Zamoyski an entire Plateau!) Now Zamoyski cashed in the theoretician's deposit.

However, it was no fortune. He could not cut his Fields like that forever, eventually they would become too tight for him.

||The second manifestation means double transfer and double buffer|| whispered the stage manager in Zamoyski's ears ||and the more often and intensively you use Plateau, the more Fields you will need.||

Zamoyski had formatted his anima exclusively for hearing and speech. This still seemed bearable to him: after all, he had been able to listen to two people at once before, he could speak and write, and still tap the rhythm of the music he was listening to with his foot...

Right? He could, he could, he could - as a human. So now he will not stop being a human because of it.

"Jesus, man, don't do that again," Moetle fumed, approaching the hearth, in which a high flame was roaring. "For a moment I was sure that it was the Wars again, or, worse, that Deformant. That something had sensed you there and already consumed you completely, that you ran away without a word." He stretched out his hands to warm them in the fireplace.

||...in the era of licensed nanoware economy|| the manager of the zone explained to Zamoyski's anima. ||Therefore, the currency of the Four Progresses is based on the parity of exotic matter, which meets both conditions, it is not generated by changing the software of any of the negentropians; and it is necessary in the basic technology, Kraft. Because the heart of every Fang. . . ||

"We are wasting time," Cress muttered.

Are they rushing me? Zamoyski's primus turned wordlessly to the stained glass windows, behind which the Gardens shimmered colorfully between curtains of shadow and light from low-flying phoenixes. As usual, the Gardens seemed deserted, this is the land of the Slovinskis.

If they could look here, into the interior of the chamber, Adam thought, they would see the statue of my manifestation, frozen for millennia. They - ghosts, quivering flames.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught his reflection in the stained glass. The manifestation came from the same aesthetic template as the design of the chamber – so there was no talk of mud, torn clothes, matted hair, a pirate beard, blood, scars and bruises. Instead of a torn shirt – a smooth, dark blue caftan reaching below the hips, fastened with red hooks along the right side. Instead of hunting boots – black moccasins. The beard and mustache were trimmed according to the example of those kings and princes immortalized in Renaissance portraits, always proudly straightened – Zamoyski keeps it just as straight.

Hasn't his physiognomy undergone a makeover? That forehead under the combed-back hair seemed too high to him. Was his manifestation going bald?

Because above all, this had changed: he looked at his reflection and no longer thought "I". He thought "my manifestation".

Behind the reflection - *high definition* purgatory. Zamoyski had already re-

cognized this rosette arrangement of fountains and squares - it had caught his eye when he looked out through the embrasure from the Gnosis lobby. So was he looking from the same place now? Or were they perhaps a floor above or a floor below? Was it adjacent to the chambers of Gnosis Incorporated?

||The House and Gardens, like the Tracts and Leased Islands, are a skeletal structure, the reason for whose existence is the iron protocol maintained here by the Emperor. The physical conditions correspond to those of Earth, the protocol does not allow for any extravagance. This *Artificial Reality* was designed for the HS Progress, when it still consisted exclusively of Stahs of the First, Second and Third Traditions. Phoenixes and a starless sky and the House and a labyrinth of hedges and alleys spreading out into infinity in all directions; and nothing more. The House is ten thousand cubic meters from the outside; it is infinite inside.||

So while Zamoyski was looking out through the large stained glass window with a Lady with an Ermine — at the same time, from the same point in the House, millions of other tenants could be looking out at the bright Gardens: Stahs, Phoebes, Inclusions. The constructs of their chambers were of course proceeding on completely different Fields, but they were assigned to the same coordinates of the House.

"Did he address himself?"

"Again?"

"Whatever you want, savage..."

"Someone should teach him the basics of etiquette. Since he is a citizen of Civilization..."

"At least he left a manifestation. I hear, so they wanted me to hear."

||Osmosis of information through the membranes of the Plateau Fields...||

Zamoyski's Primus approached the large mahogany table, covered with candlesticks, jugs, goblets and bowls of fruit, piled high with books and parchments. There was even an old skull. The bone of the skull, cracked by the forehead, was the colour of milk chocolate in the yellow candlelight. Urged on by the specialization manager, Adam had hastily chosen the $\mathrm{Da}_V inci_V I Itemplate for his chambers - it si con remind ed him of the seal of Orthodoxy HS.$

Ignoring the questions of the guests, he unrolled the largest of the rolls. It was a map of the sky of AD 2100 as seen from the original position of the Earth. An arrow drawn in red ink pointed to a star of low relative brightness, in the constellation Leo.

Adam covered the edges of the parchment with heavy candlesticks.

He nodded to Moetle, who was the only one who had not yet approached the table.

"Hakata," Zamoyski told him, pointing to the star. "But you called it something else. Dreyfuss, as I gather. That's where you flew. That's where you died."

Moetle looked at him questioningly, leaning dangerously over the table. He braced himself with his left hand between the platter and the skull, and from that position he glanced at Zamoyski and then at the map.

"Destination point," Adam said. "I gave you those coordinates then. Dreyfuss. Those are the four cubic parsecs you stole, aren't they? That's what the Emperor told me; those are them. They stole you along with them. You, Fangs, your corpse." Venom oiled his tongue, the words flowed more and more smoothly, they were unable to interrupt him, they stood and listened. "The wells gave true information. I am the original cause of this war." Because I don't think any of you believe in such a coincidence that the same star towards which the *Wolszczan* was thrown on the Krafthole from the Eridani Sinkhole and toward the one which Moetle flew to, has now been accidentally cut out of the universe. Who exactly is conducting negotiations with the Deformants?"

"You know!" Moetle bristled.

"Who is conducting negotiations with the Deformants?"

"How much more do you remember, Stahs?" Stern asked.

"The leaks from the Time Well have nothing to do with it," Cress said.

"Stahs Judas earnestly asks you for permission for full archiving," Patrick Gheorg said. "The price is negotiable. Stahs?"

Zamoyski's Secundus barked an order, and a log crackled in the fireplace

with a bang, and the candle flames shot out sheaves of sparks up to the high ceiling.

Zamoyski's Primus raised a finger.

"Because I'll mute you."

Patrick and Moetle looked at each other knowingly.

"Oh" Moetle muttered.

He straightened up, poured himself some wine and downed the goblet in one movement.

"Oh" Zamoyski agreed sarcastically. "I advise you to remember that. Can Judas hear me?"

"Yes" Cress and Patrick Gheorg replied simultaneously.

"That's good." Adam took a deep breath. "I'd like to..."

"I'm copying the full archive of scans from Beatrice and Forry's wedding to your Fields, Stahs" Cress interrupted him. "Compensation for any wrongs will be paid voluntarily by Gnosis, there is no need to appeal to the arbitration of the Lodge courts. The entirety of the reports from the Gnosis Well concerning you will be made available upon request."

Zamoyski's Primus moved his lips silently. A second, two, three. Finally, Adam recovered enough to at least look away from the inclusion's primus.

This is called being called to order! He was involuntarily hunching his shoulders, hiding his head between his shoulders. Did you think that something depended on you here, that you could direct something? We saw right through you, glass chicken.

He sat down heavily in a tall chair made of dark wood - a manifestation from which a quarter of its soul had been dropped.

Moetle grimaced, disgusted.

"Get off it," he advised the Inclusion.

||How deep do their behavioral models of the phrenium go?||

||If they have your fresh archives, as well as a scan of your current hollow and a record of the implementation process, one can expect high fidelity of simulation. Of course, decreasing over time; but still.||

||How do I deal with this?||

||If you were a Phoebe, this would not be a problem. In the case of Stahs, it is very difficult."

||Speak.||

||Basic commandments that everyone follows. Never-ever voluntarily reveal information you have. Manifest as rarely as possible in places of public scanning. Avoid emotional statements formulated in an unconventional way. Conventions are safe. Do not act on first instinct the longer the premeditation, the greater the randomness of the final decision. Lay down disinformation noise.||

||How?||

||There are applications that randomize the behavior of manifestations. As part of this stage. . . ||

||Launch.||

He hoped that he would never experience such humiliation again. To hear from someone else's mouth the retorts to secrets and plans that have not yet been said! In a way, this was the worst of everything he had experienced here so far — because it made him realize who/what he really was to them, a primitive program from the bottom of the Curve.

"We're wasting time," Cress repeated.

Zamoyski raised his head.

"Deformants," he growled. "*Casus belli*. The state of negotiations."

"Are you talking about the discrepancy protocol, Stahs?" Stern spoke up.

"Yes." Zamoyski's Primus straightened in his chair. "Those Fangs that you supposedly stole from them. Why? To cut out Hakata with Moetle? Nobody knew the coordinates, after all. But Deformant Fangs were used, Hakata, that is Dreyfuss, taken into Port, Moetle was killed, the war started, the galaxy

collapsed — because I got drunk."

Now there was a barely perceptible moment of hesitation, both in Cress and Stern. Zamoyski even frowned, what calculations were the inclusions of Gnosis and the Office performing, that it became visible even in k-time?

In turn, the manifestations of Cress and Stern looked at Moetle in unison.

He even took a step back, stepping away from the table, separating himself from them with it.

"What...?"

||Imperial information, top priority: two G-plancks ago there was a ceasefire, the front Inclusions of the Deformants and Civilization reached a preliminary agreement. Shall we elaborate?||

"The end of the war?" Zamoyski was surprised.

Suddenly, the primus crossed his legs. It surprised Adam so much that he almost fell off the chair. Not his will, not his movement, not his intention and execution.

Nevertheless, in this pose the words spoken later sounded different.

"So you didn't know! I gave them such valuable information for free! — Holy shit!"

But after all — an immediate reflection — they couldn't have known! Everything was broken into completely separate chains of information, the *Wolszczan*'s past locked in Zamoyski's oblivion; Moetle's place of death - in his lost hollow; stolen space - empty coordinates on the maps of Civilization and Deformants. There was only one system in which these chains could meet and overlap; in which the identification of the star could be made and the absurdity of the mutual suspicions of Deformants and Civilization could be proven; only one system, the mind of Adam Zamoyski.

"The end of the war? The beginning of another," said Stern.

"What is it that we 'didn't know?'" groaned the bewildered Moetle. "Why are you staring at me like that? I didn't do anything! A ceasefire, all right - but surely it wasn't thanks to him!" He pointed to Zamoyski's primus. "What

did he say? Who killed me, who stole this star system, if not the Deformants? I don't understand anything!"

Warm satisfaction filled Adam's veins. He doesn't understand! He wanted to snort. "That speaks well of him!" He is a man!

He crossed his arms across his Primus's chest. Please! And now it is no longer he, no longer Zamoyski, who is the most ill-informed, the blind man at the ball of the seeing! Isn't that a divine feeling? Truly, there is symmetry in the chaos of history.

Suddenly he felt in this form - sprawled on a gnarled chair, with one leg crossed over the other, the blue of the stained glass window on his back, with the great, living fire of the roaring fireplace on his left - perfectly fitted into the role and the scene and the drama. Stahs Adam Zamoyski, yes. He looked at Moetle's manifestation and didn't even care to stop the smile that was curling on the Primus' lips. Don't I deserve such a moment, at least one? Before Francis devours me, before the octagons annihilate me. Don't I have the right? *You've passed into history, Adam.* It's true. So enjoy the rare joys of historical figures. As long as you can, for this one moment – feel like Judas McPherson. Until they rip out your spine.

"The beginning of a new war!" Moetle mimicked Stern. "With whom...? Zamoyski knew – he knew first."

"With the Suzerain."

III

Everything that exists changes over time. Every environment changes over time.

The environment that contains all others is the universe. The universe is defined solely by the laws of physics.

For a given environment, there is only one Perfect Form. There is only one Perfect Form in the universe. The Perfect Form of an environment based on more general conditions wins and displaces the Perfect Form of an environment based on more specific conditions. The Perfect Form defined solely by the laws of physics wins and displaces all other forms.

Further evolution requires a change in the laws of physics.

Plateau

NEGENTROPIANS

Elements of matter/energy self-organization systems.

There are five forms of negentropians.

I. Simple:

1. Hardware: information carrier (implementer).

2. Software: information (record of self-organization procedures, subject to evolution).

II. Complex:

3. Bioware: a form based on organic replicants.

In the Homo Sapiens Civilization these are terrestrial flora and fauna and their derivatives, including Stahs. (Basis: DNA/RNA).

4. Nanoware: a form based on nanomachines.

In the Homo Sapiens Civilization: imperial nanoware, limited by law, custom and protocols — inf (*Imperial Nanoware Field*).

> ↳ In the HS Civilization, the optimal building block of nanoware is considered to be the Von Neumann triads, each consisting of three complementary nanoelements: tone, croton, and/or ort. They organize themselves in spatial configurations: TKO, TTK, KKK, etc. There are 27 basic triads and a potentially infinite number of their isomers (e.g. the TOT9 destruction triad and the OOO_1 crystallization triad).
>
> ↳ There are 19,683 second-degree, nine-element triads, and a proportionally large number of their isomers.

5. Kraftware: a form based on Kraft.

It includes some logical Inclusions (the Emperor in the Homo Sapiens Civilization) and some plateau Phoebes; theoretically also the Suzerain.

NSCC PROTOCOLS

A set of rules for the Nanoware Sticture-Configuration Code, specifying the

permitted ways in which NSCC algorithms may manifest in the inf.

↳Key protocols:

↳ *Standard Imperial Protocol* (SIP), also known as the "Imperial Protocol" or simply "the Protocol." In the HS Civilization, it covers all spaces accessible to Stahs hollows, including the biospheres of all of its Earth-like planets.

↳*First Tradition Imperial Protocol* (FTIP), a protocol of the First Tradition. It narrows the terms of SIP to the traditions of the Stahs civilization.

↳*First Tradition Orthodox Imperial Protocol* (FTOIP), also known as "Orthodoxy." It narrows the terms of FTIP, including allowing neither configuration nor deconfiguration of manifestations within its borders, and imposing algorithms of biological death.

↳*Standard Imperial Protocol for Space* (SIPS), a space protocol. Extends the SIP conditions. Numerous subprotocols: for the atmospheres of gas giants, for vacuum, for barren planets, for low orbits.

"Multithesaurus" (HS Subcode)

THE sun thundered from the cloudless blue, the salty wind tore at the purple banners on the castle towers, the birds screamed — Zamoyski was following the black murderess.

By manifesting herself in Farstone, she broke Imperial protocols. He walked backwards along the lines of violation. The forcibly re-indexed nanoware shone in the air with icy blackness. The strings were springy, pulling the woman further away from Judas, from the guests, off the lawn — the tendons of the beast. They were the same color as the pigment of mortmanifestation.

He walked behind her — the last faithful subject of Entropy. Everyone and everything else here disobeyed her, people walked backwards, birds flew with their tails forward, spilled drinks rose in high streams into glasses, banners crackled in unnatural bursts of canvas.

Zamoyski saw the end of the black strings and accelerated. He overtook the murderess. Here the strings began: a black hole the size of a fist, a ball of darkness, an eye of the night bulging on a sunny day, a meter and a half above the stone pavement, just beyond the bend of the castle. It inexorably drew the woman, her back was already emerging from behind the wall, the tall flame sizzled fiercely.

”Stop. What is this?”

Phoebe Patrick Gheorg McPherson flashed their manifestation for a second.

”Source nano.”

Adam was irritated.

”Come out!”

Gheorg’s Primus stood on Zamoyski’s left.

”Play it to the end” they said ”you’ll see how it configures itself.”

||...seventeenth request for a meeting from Osca Cress *filius* Gnosis, one hundred and fourteenth from Osca Suze *filius* Skortz, first from...||

Zamoyski consistently ignored the voices reaching his //ears.

His primus conjured a reed out of thin air and pointed it at the frozen tendons of the nano-assassin.

"But really — what is it really?"

"Can I...?"

"Please."

Both manifestations disappeared, and Zamoyski's entire field of vision was filled with a thick, gray fog.

||Allow me,|| said P. G.

Zoom, zoom, zoom. They were sinking deeper into those misty clouds. Gray clouds were parting to the sides and Adam immediately saw between them fragments of a castle wall, a piece of lawn, a patch of sky, also a black string, piercing the fog like a negative of a laser beam. In the lower right corner of their field of vision, the Phoebe turned on the scale counter. *Zoom, zoom, zoom.* They were falling at a steady pace, orders of magnitude ticking every second; they were just leaving the mesocosm.

||Do you see?||

Disembodied, devoid of any manifestation — you are the direction of your gaze, the point of focus of your senses, nothing more. Patrick turned Zamoyski's gaze 40° to the right, 30° down. Adam was now swimming into a streak of shadow.

Minus 6, minus 7. The fog looked as if it had been touched by severe pixelation: from a uniform substance it had changed into a disorganized collection of multicolored clots.

Minus 8. Sudden transition: the collections were already organized.

Zoom, stop. ||Now you can see both the building blocks and the structure. Look first at the imperial, the lighter one. What colors can you recognize?||

||Wait... that goes down to the components. Yellow, blue, red.||

||Tone, croton, and ortho. If I were to rewind a little, you would see the full palette of triads: twenty-seven combinations, twenty-seven shades. This is

the school assignment. Yellow, blue, and red. From these three building blocks, using the inf programming language, NSCC, we configure all possible operators. Also our manifestations. Also mammoids. Also the Civilizations of Death. Tone, croton, and ortho. See? They fill all space; of course, in varying densities. Read the Foundation Agreement. Every inhabited space belonging to the Civilization of Homo Sapiens, and under the Third Amendment, the vacuum of space enclosed in its Ports, is filled with imperial nanoware.||

||Wait a minute — that means there, in Africa. . . ||

||The whole Earth. Here, at Beatrice's wedding — you breathed inf, drank it, sweated it, it circulated in your veins, penetrated your skin, settled in your brain. It's everywhere.||

A rainbow mist enveloped their disembodied perceptions from all sides. KTTOOTKTKOOTTKOTTKOTKTOOOO-KTTOTTOKTKKKOTTKTOTOKTKOTKTTOTOKT-
KTOTKTKTKTOOOTKTKTTOKTTOKTTOKO- TOTKTOKTOKTTOTKTKTKOOOTKTOKTTI
KOKKTOTKTOTTTKKTOO...

It breathes, drinks, excretes...

Yet at this moment it is not the Emperor who is invading his hollow — but Francis.

If Zamoyski had a body — if he had one now — he would probably shake with disgust. They all live in the guts of a leviathan. What does it matter that they are inorganic? When considered at this level, everything is already organic or inorganic, as you like.

But I can't think otherwise. A slimy monster, an amorphous beast, a cold leviathan. They live in him, he in them. They consider it normal. Fucking Civilization!

Frost ran down Zamoyski's spine. (But he doesn't have a spine.)

If in the whole of Civilization — then there, then, in Africa too, in Puermageze, in the grove by a stream. Further, in the Sak, in de la Roche's hand*et consortes*. What exactly did Angelica claim? That what was the origin of Smaug? Surely not the imperial nano cut off from the Plateau? The Wars cut them off — and the Wars were released by the Civilizations, not De la Roche's Horizontalists. The Horizontalists could not have foreseen this; they had kidnapped us

earlier. Therefore, they must have had some other way of getting rid of the inf. So obvious to everyone that no one even thought about it.

The Phoebe asked:

||Unlicensed nano|| replied. ||There are many models of nanoware much more virulent than inf. Imperial is not optimal in this respect, because it does not operate at the lowest possible atomic level.||

It jerked. Zoom. Minus 9.

The field of vision was filled with a group of red and blue granules, each like a balloon. Zamoyski moved between them effortlessly, penetrating through narrow gaps - a point, a zero-dimensional body, a wave of inf-wind. He sailed under several dozen balloons connected in series and saw a cloud of furious purple.

Another jerk. Minus 10. He fell between purple pyramids.

||Now these are nanobots *in limine*. Pure simulation of course|| the Phoebe said. ||Sub-enzymatic engines, single-pattern assemblers and replicators, specialized disassemblers... The imperial nano is, as you can see, much larger than them, and thus vulnerable to attacks from lower levels.||

||So why...?||

||The Law. For safety. Read the Foundation. We would never have allowed such a spread of inf if it had not been controlled, so to speak, “at the very base”.||

They did not descend to the level of purple nano; instead, they turned sharply upwards and pierced the surface of the nearest balloon. A flash of yellow — then another world.

Zamoyski had to keep reminding himself that this was merely a model, a representation.

The skeleton of the nanobot — an ort — was built symmetrically, based on a multidodecahedron. Long chains of executive molecules were attached to every fourth external atom. Here, inside the bot, the visualization lost its elegance and smoothness: the boundaries of individual atoms seemed blurred, and the

atoms themselves had a strange, hard-to-describe shape, closest not to a sphere, but to ellipsoids, hourglasses, and often even prisms.

At the heart of the multiple dodecahedron was a mysterious tangle of molecules, so tight that it was difficult to distinguish individual electron clouds.

||Each Imperial Nanobot is controlled directly from the Plateau. Manifestations of the inf are a reflection of the NSCC programs. The NSCC map is changing—the bonds and 3D structures of the infu are changing. Do you understand now what that black nano is?||

||Hacked Inf.||

||Yes.||

The Phoebe snapped the visualization and restored the old manifestation addresses.

Zamoyski's Primus lowered his hand with the cane. He blinked in the July sun, looked at the woman, the fire, the strings. He raised his hand again. The struck tendons resonated. The Emperor was perverted. Someone had entered their Fields.

All of Farstone was covered by the First Tradition protocol. Does a tendon with a fire on its skull fit in it? The greatest absurdities are born of machine error and machine over-correction.

Adam started the recording again. The black mortmanifestation was pulled back, the Phoebe and the Stahs stepped back. It went at a rate of one second per second, and the ending (that is, the beginning) happened in a flash. Two meters in front of the Eye of Night, the ebony-skinned girl fell apart. First, the flame on her skull went out — as if an acetylene torch had been suddenly turned off. Then — crack-crack-crack; three blinks of an eye — she folded in on herself, like organic ori-gami. Twice, four times, eight times — backwards, along the black lines of violation — 64 times, 128 times... the Eye of Night sucked her in.

Now another second, one and a half — it too closed, withdrawing from the light into its invisible domains.

"A moment for entropy," Adam muttered.

A turn and...

The simulation jumped forward.

Once again (for the fourth time, I think) he saw the course of events. A grenade of darkness exploded in the air saturated with sunlight, and through the hole emerged the Eye, a black bulb, a pocket of night. Pulsating faster and faster, it gave the murderess' embryo into the light of day. It, having barely fallen into the light, began to develop with terrifying speed into a full manifestation.

Zamoyski ordered a restart and watched it once more, this time without the visualization of the micro-informatic structures.

The black girl exploded *ex nihilo*, straight out of thin air. Maybe only that fraction of a second earlier—the afterimage of a movement too violent to be reflected in the pupils... But if someone knows what to expect, they will see a frenetic dance of tightly entangled arms, legs, ribs, skin, internal organs, yet in no way resembling fragments of human anatomy. It was as if anatomical atlases were drawn by cubists...

"Enough," he whispered. "I have to think." He smiled mockingly at the will of the randomizer,.

Gheorg processed this somehow in their own way, because suddenly they jumped out with a proposition:

"If you have no other obligations, Stahs, I invite you to the 'Three Crowns.'"

||"Three Crowns," inf.||

||A private Stahs-Phoebe club, London, under Orthodoxy protocols. Rules? History? Members? Other details?||

"Thank you."

P. G. sent him the addresses and access crypto to the Buffer Fields. Zamoyski reflexively smoothed his Chinese caftan and re-addressed himself.

They were standing on the steps of a brick building in the old part of London. The post-condensation air vortex was already slowing down, dust and leaves were slowly settling down. Gheorg's manifestation was just raising his hand to knock; the manifestation was the same (the same) as in Farstone. Zamoyski

hadn't changed either: $\mathrm{Da}_V inci_V II, Lord of the Orient^{-} nowit's a hard de fault.$

Before entering, he looked back at the street, towards the intersection. A couple of teenagers were shouting at each other from opposite sidewalks. A car drove by (a silver Mercedes). An older man was reading a newspaper as he walked, the wind snatching it from him and crumpling it. A dog ran around the corner, sniffed the man's shoe, nudged his leg with its head - the man, without looking, reached down and stroked the mutt.

Were these secondary manifestations? Adam was certain they weren't. He saw real, biological people, a real dog, an automobile polluting the air - the 20th century in the 29th century.

Zamoyski and McPherson entered the "Three Crowns".

This was not Mycroft Holmes's "Diogenes Club", but no one here raised their voices above the level of lazy conversation, and Adam didn't see many women either. All the furniture was made of dark wood, dark wood covered the walls, burgundy carpets covered the parquet floor, muffled the sound of footsteps... The silence had the depth and texture of an Arabic tapestry.

The oil lamps installed in the wainscoting emitted a honey-brown, heavy light. How heavy could light be? Yes, exactly like this, covering every tangible surface with a rough layer of amber dust. Even people move slower and more fluidly under the touch of such light; time laboriously breaks through between one moment and another.

The host of the club (a bearded gentleman in a three-breasted suit) seated them in the corner of the third salon after a short courteous conversation, where it was even darker. Zamoyski watched the departing man. Nanomats? Biological hollow? Because it was definitely not OVR.

He asked Patrick through the mouth of the anima.

||Did you see the bas-relief above the door?|| he replied with a question.

||No. What bas-relief?||

||Da Vinci's sketch, a man inscribed in a square. I'll show you later. It's a First Tradition engraving. Orthodoxy of the HS Civilization.||

||Ah. I see.||

However, the two of them were present only in nanomatic manifestations. Zamoyski regretted that he could not smell the real smell of this place.

The butler brought alcohol.

P. G. excused themself and went to the next room. Zamoyski sat down more freely. He realized that Patrick had left because Adam had said his “I have to think” out loud - and the “Three Crowns” were the perfect place for quiet reflection.

He also realized this now - on this section of the Curve - redirecting to any place in Civilization (on Earth, in the Solar System, in another Port, in another inclusion, in plateau AR constructs) is always a matter of the same several-dozen k-seconds - the time necessary for the full configuration of manifestation, depending on the original density of the infu at the destination point. So jumping at the whim of the mood to a favorite landscape, to exotic skies that matched the tension of the moment, stars with a glow as sharp and hot as the conversation being held — all of this was completely rational. Heck, Adam was already beginning to instinctively understand the naturalness of such a lifestyle. After all, he hadn’t forgotten how he used to drive across half the city to have lunch at his favorite restaurant — across half of Europe to order suits from his favorite tailor. What had changed? Nothing. It was only easier to fulfill whims, the path between thought and action was shortened.

The heights of the Curve tempted, the UI attracted. Calotropism finally speaks in every creature, the baser, the faster.

Zamoyski’s Primus tasted unknown alcohols, God only knows under what suns, in what Ports they were distilled; he didn’t want to ask the OES, without explanations they remained richer by one more flavor. In the light of the wicks soaked in oil, the glass had the color of contaminated jade.

He could hear the murmur of quiet conversations—and that “rustle of luxury” that was typical of such places—but he was able to shut himself off from it, ignore it, just as he ignored the whispers that reached his ears constantly.

I could live like this, he thought. This is a good life. The blue caftan was reflected on the surface of the glass he was turning in his hand. I am alone; no

one is watching me, no one is supervising me. I have citizenship, I am a Stahs...

He knew that 99% of the Earth's population were not citizens of the HS Civilization. Not because these people did not fit into the appropriate range of the Curve, but because they could not afford it. The Foundation Agreement was written in accordance with the ideas of the then owners of technology, the Homo Sapiens Civilization was founded by the industrial and political establishment of the 22nd century.

So I guess I can say that I belong to the elite, the aristocracy of this world.

(But higher still are the aristocracies of the universe; and the aristocracy of all possible universes...).

Next to it lay a box with the emblem of three golden crowns on the lid. He opened it. Cigars. He smiled involuntarily.

He stood up, lit one in the flame of the lamp. Only the taste, no smell; but what a taste...! Who pays for all this?

//He asked.

The zone manager drew from the public Fields and answered:

||Introductory member.||

That is Patrick.

The market value of such a cigar is, however, close to zero, as is the case with any product of infu reconfiguration. In his mind's eye, Zamoyski could almost see those endless tobacco fields, rows of plants reaching the horizon, sown, growing and stripped of leaves by - by ghosts. The cigar was not worth a single molecule of exotic matter.

Nevertheless, Patrick took full responsibility for Adam, and that meant much more than an obligation to settle the bills. There were certain strict rules here.

The First Tradition... they did not manifest themselves immediately in the club, but outside, on the stairs. They entered—one foot at a time, crossing the threshold. So even such details...

Leaning back in the indecently comfortable armchair, Zamoyski inhaled the

damp smoke.

Details, a way to bypass the Farstone protocol.

Details, why did she want to kill me too?

Details, why, why didn't she succeed?

Adam watched the moment of Judas' murder over twenty times, in accordance with the arrow of time and against it, on a normal scale, in slow motion and even in fast motion. How she tore out his spine, how she ripped open the hollow, tearing the body in half with one movement of her powerful arms. Then she and the rest of the lances would spin around in an instant and rushed towards Zamoyski.

He had rewound this fragment many times, he knew it almost by heart. Angelica was getting up from the bench, pale. Adam, dazed, looked around, not understanding anything. The mortal manifestations ran, leaping like gazelles across the lawn. The guests stood and watched, silently, motionless: nothing to do, nothing to say.

Why the woman at all? That flame from the skull. It's stupid. Why? Wouldn't it be easier to hack the Fields assigned directly to the nanoware absorbed by the victim's hollow? The ergonomics of murder are a science like any other. It would burn my heart to ash before anyone noticed.

Zamoyski exhaled smoke from his lungs, leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes. He began to question the specialization manager with his disembodied anima. The OES sucked in information from Plateau, interpreted it, compiled it, converted it into a discursive message and in this form applied it to the inputs corresponding to the sense of hearing of Adam's secundus.

This interface, although so obstructive to the flow of information, remained necessary, since Zamoyski was not a Phoebe and his mind was not able to absorb information by direct osmosis from Plateau. First of all, his mind was not on Plateau at all, it only used it. Hence the limitation.

But how much can a person learn in this way / learn in a unit of time? — listening, reading, feeling...? Compared to Phoebes and Inclusions — practically nothing. They are gods.

Yes, UI tempts, UI attracts — light, sun, guiding star...

He shook off his terrifying dreams.

The manner of the attack proves that the one behind it, the perpetrator, the Programmer, does not have free access to the entire Plateau inf index, he only penetrated to the section responsible for the cubic decimeter behind the castle bend, manipulated the contents of its Fields and then fell back into the protocol.

So in truth, the Programmer did not break the FTIP.

No; if it is possible to grade impossibilities, he did something even more impossible, he broke into the Plateau inf indexes.

The manager of the special operations informed Zamoyski that the Office was conducting an intensive investigation into the matter. Five open Inclusions were created solely for the purpose of solving this mystery. The results remain, of course, classified.

This didn't irritate Zamoyski, he knew well who the Programmer was (the Suzerain, who else?), and the method of Plateau hacking used (it was a vulgar Flow) didn't interest him much; he wouldn't have understood anything from the metaphysical explanations anyway.

However, this detail - that the Suzerain can't Flow to arbitrarily chosen Fields; that he doesn't fully control his manifestations on Plateau - gave Adam enormous encouragement. He wants to kill me after all! Dear God, if he could Flow at will, he would have murdered me a million times over!

But - the second detail - why exactly? What threat am I to him? When did I manage to step on his toes?

In the Memory Palace, manifesting himself through my subconscious, the Suzerain was babbling something about the destruction of the universe, about Narva. Narva in general, for some reason, won't leave him alone.

Zamoyski sucked on juicy tobacco and tapped his fingernails on the mahogany tabletop.

Mhmmmm. What is the exact chronology of events? One. Gnosis finds the

Wolszczan.

Two. They extract the bio-waste.

Three. They reconstruct my hollow, my brain. They install an implant and fire up the supervisory AI. Nina.

(He bites his teeth on his cigar.)

Four. Moetle pulls an ace out from his sleeve and extracts the flight history, including the characteristics of Hakata–Dreyfuss from me. He leases a trident and flies there.

(Now, guesses; but strong ones.)

Five. Moetle arrives at the scene, maybe lands on Narva. He informs no one, communicates with no one, with no one, with no one, with no one, with no one, with no one. It's his secret, his *wunderwaffe* in the endless family war. Adam could perfectly imagine the excitement that seized Moetle at the sight of Hakata, the sun that is not a sun.

But Moetle must have entered Plateau for something - Zamoyski supposed that it wasn't even Moetle's conscious decision; maybe it was just a periodic update of the phren archive.

In this way - six - the Suzerain finds out.

He finds out - but about what? what did Moetle see on Narva? - and he immediately Flows down to the Deformants' Plateau, to the Fields governing their Fangs. If he could, he would Flow down to all of them; these are already large numbers. (How many Ports do the Deformants have? How many Fangs are organs of their bodies, like Francis?) He snatches up these Fangs, gathers them around the Dreyfuss system and dekrafts it - with Moetle inside.

Seven. Moetle is out. Narva is in the Suzerain's hand.

But that's not enough for him, because — eight — he pulls that stunt with the Fire Assassin at Beatrice's wedding.

Objective one: Judas McPherson, his current hollow, and the archives. The Suzerain doesn't exactly succeed with the archives. (Another sign that he's not omnipotent, he's not omnipotent!). What's more, he didn't foresee the Hori-

zontalists' conspiracy. If not for his premature attack, De la Roche's plan *et consortes* really could have succeeded. Meanwhile, the Suzerain only caused the introduction of new security measures. Judas lives — exists — still.

Objective two: me. Why? So that I don't remember Narva again? But how this Narva threatens the Suzerain — I don't know. (I've ruined my own memory). I have no idea why his attempt on me didn't succeed...!

Zamoyski saved that fragment of the wedding recording under the voice macro secundus. Firing it simultaneously caused the anima perceptor to fully develop.

He was already able to withstand parallel experiences of two bodies - two full packages of physiological impressions, two streams of visual and auditory stimuli. He still had problems with the labyrinth; he still felt dizzy when he stood and sat, walked and ran, stood and fell, sat and ran... But even that was better: he didn't scream, fall, or vomit. *You have moved upwards along the Progress Curve.* (Can this process be stopped at all...?)

So - detail three:

She stands behind her back, when the first of the black giantesses runs up to the bench, bypasses the petrified Angelica (the girl's facial expression is strange) and, like a unicorn, strikes, leaning, with momentum, with a blue blade of fire - in Zamoyski's face. He is blind, does not see her, does not know what is happening; he wanted to ask Angelica, but did not have time.

Now the Riddle. The flame enters Zamoyski, the black woman runs into him, the momentum throws them against the trunk of an oak tree, Zamoyski screams, waves his arms incoherently, tries to push the giantess away... pfch! Nanomats explodes in his face in a whirlwind of nanoware dust. The bonds have broken, the configuration information has been lost, entropy jumps a high curve — there is no more woman. 0.42 k-seconds later, the remaining copies of her disintegrate.

However, none of this was the Emperor's doing. Adam received a strict schedule of the actions taken at the time along with the recording. Apart from the fact that the Emperor himself admits that they were ineffective — none of them correlate in time with the Suzerain's demanifestation.

Could it be that the Suzerain withdrew on his own? But why would he do

so — in the middle of the mission, without having achieved his goal?

Because the Riddle essentially ends with the following question: how on earth did Zamoyski survive? The fire bursting from the giantess's skull had the temperature of stellar plasma, five million degrees (inf measured). The flame was heading straight for Zamoyski's face. It should have burned his brain through and through.

Meanwhile, not a scar.

How is that possible, Adam asked the Emperor. It is impossible, the Emperor replied.

But even questions, if asked correctly, carry information. Why did the Suzerain try to burn the brain of my hollow? Reverse the emphasis.

The Suzerain tried to burn the brain of my hollow!

He did not attack the archives of Adam Zamoyski placed on the Fields of Gnosis — but only this specific biological realization of it, this hollow, this brain, this mind implemented in it.

What is the point of that? The obvious answer is to destroying the added information. Cutting off the phrenium line before the next archiving.

But not in this case: Zamoyski had a multifunctional implant in his brain, an AI was sitting on it, supervising and backing up all brain functions in real time. Zamoyski was being archived continuously. Destroyed information added — it would be some near-zero, statistical white noise on the neurons.

But can it be explained otherwise?

No. A manifestation is just a manifestation. The Suzerain would gain nothing from it.

But Zamoyski somehow couldn't believe it.

He delved into reanalyzing the data collected during the event. At the molecular level, most of the data came from the spontaneously configuring diagnostic triads of KTK27, the so-called "Borodino lilies". (He was already learning the slang names of the individual nano-bots.) There was a certain two-planck discontinuity here...

"Stahs."

He opened his eyes, took the cigar out of his mouth, froze over the body of the black woman frozen in disintegration.

A tall, obese man in a white suit stood before him. Smiling, he stroked the bald skull with his powerful hand. Now he bowed slightly and handed Zamoyski a business card.

Adam stood up, reached into his left sleeve, handed his own — in the European way, with one hand. Business cards were attached to the public Imperial Fields, as he commanded *savoir-vivre* of Civilization.

The bald man's business card (who does he remind me of...?) read:

PRAHBE MICHAŁ FLAME AMBASSADOR PLENIPULATIOUS OF THE THIRD CIVILIZATION OF PROGRESS OF THE RAHABS

The plateau business card was incomparably richer. //Adam stepped from behind the bench into the endless data galleries, where salons of audiovisual educational constructs opened up at every step, presenting civilized (that is approved by the Gnosis Inc. censorship) versions of information packages on the physiology of Rahabs, the cultural and cognitive foundations of their Progress, individual Rahab Civilizations, their location on the Curve, mutual relations and relations with other Progresses/Civilizations, or Deformants, the current position of the front of their Inclusions opened on the road to UI...

He indicated to the chair next to him to the Rahab. They sat down.

"How can I be of service, Prahbe?"

vAh, I would like to offer you my services. Stahs."

"As an ambassador?"

"Not officially, not on behalf of my Civilization, if that's what you're asking, Stahs. Nevertheless, I am its ambassador."

It's a nanomatic manifestation, Zamoyski concluded, shifting the thought back to his secundus. Nanomat, no biological void. Do Rahabs have gender? On the other hand, what does it matter? It's a Prahbe, *Post-Rahab Being*. It's a Rahab to the extent that a Phoebe is human.

“So what services do you have in mind, Prahbe?”

“We’ve heard of your duel with Osca Tutankhamun. It’s quite unusual for an Inclusion to challenge a Stahs. Everyone in the Progressives considers it highly, um, tactless of em. If I could help in any way,”

The Behavior Randomizer stretches Zamoyski’s lips into a cynical smile—when in reality Adam was rather confused and irritated.

“I don’t really believe in this whole charade,” he muttered. ”I mean, yes, I know I’m in for a duel... But none of this adds up: metaphysics, space engineering, star civilizations, AI and UI — and here it is, a duel! For God’s sake...!”

Prahbe Flame made an uncoordinated movement with his massive hands. (Is he also hiding from a psychological spy? What do the behavioral models of the Rahab phren look like?)

”It’s Civilization, Stahs.”

Zamoyski clenched his teeth around his cigar.

”Not yours.”

“A secondary difference. Don’t look at me like that, I’m not a Horizontalist, but — but you don’t have to be a Horizontalist to admit that the community of phren structures is more important than a common history. From the Stahs’ perspective, it may not be entirely clear. . . ”

“Humans are different from Rahabs, who are different from Antari, who are different from Usz.”

“Yes, but HS Progress Inclusions and RKI Progress Inclusions are almost one species.”

“Species!”

“What word should I use? I have good connections.”

“No, Prahbe, I understand what you want to tell me. Royal families have always considered themselves related to each other; it is the plebs and the poor who are prisoners of borders and languages. But why, when they are already here, down here, imposing these bonds, this Civilization...” Zamoyski made a

wide arc with his hand with the cigar, embracing the interior of the “Three Crowns” with a gesture. ”Why is it so theatrical?”

“They have been playing for six hundred years” laughed Flame. ”What is it supposed to be?”

“Is it like this with you too? With your. . . ” //Zamoyski looked up the term to describe the Rahabs from the first third ”Parahabs?”

“The Parahabs create their own Civilizations. The Third Civilization of the RKI Progress includes part of the second and the beginning of the third third. Sometimes, however, I have the honor of speaking on behalf of the equivalent of the Grand Lodge in our Progress, and then I also represent the Civilizations that only understand my connections. Your Progress is unique in this respect. Why mess with a mechanism that works so well? You have a wonderful Civilization. Maybe that’s what it takes to withstand such stretching on the Curve—a bit of theatricality, exaggeration, kitsch, and self-distance? Irony ensures longevity.”

“Because you, Prahbe, look at it as a mechanism. To me, a culture that cannot develop is dead. There is no happiness in stagnation.”

The Ambassador spread his thick arms wide.

“Bah! But is there happiness in change? You know, Stahs. Everything naturally tends toward the UI. You know what death is, the end of a structure’s existence in the form that constitutes its identity—through disintegration or transformation into another form. There are no rules stronger than the Laws of Progress; they are the most basic principles, rooted deeper than the laws of physics. Every culture, society, every species under the pressure of competition, in a universe of constant conditions, inevitably improves itself, following the curve of change toward the UI. From the less well-adapted to the better-adapted; the former therefore die. Progress is in fact the history of the destruction of successive realizations of phren. This Curve is a map of the cemetery of cultures. Each culture balances on a knife’s edge, is the victim of forces tearing it apart: progressive and conservative. If the progressive prevails, identity is lost - and that is death. If the conservative prevails, nothing changes until the end, when other cultures, better adapted, overwhelm the former - and that too is death. The difference appears at the moment of such acceleration of the journey along the Curve that the above dependencies are observed as hard statistical laws, a model is formulated - as Alphonse Remy formulated it in your case - and

based on its knowledge, actions are taken to simultaneously preserve identity and protect oneself from cultures from the heights of the Curve - because then there is already an awareness of the threat. So Civilizations come into being. At least that is what happened in the Four Progresses. Of course, this is also not the final, eternal solution, but. . . "

"And Deformants? I find patterns describing divergent Progresses in the public Fields..."

"Ideological gibberish. Deformation is usually born as a rebellion against Civilization. This too is a certain line of change, but of course it does not tend towards UL. To call it Progress would be a great exaggeration, because since it does not strive for perfection, how can its progress or degeneration be measured? Undirected change is simply deformation. Of course, Deformants — nor Civilizations lying lower on the Curve — would not be possible if the universe were completely developed, the entire space filled with life. Similarly, on Earth, various eccentric cultures persisted as long as they were isolated, until the world closed and the rules of competition began to apply to them. You can call them 'natural Deformants.' I know that later you had various such enclaves of archaism, religiously or politically motivated — already conscious Deformations, conscious escapes from Progress: the Chinese Empire, and in the West — the Amish; museums of communism in Cuba or North Korea, the Taliban, then the Protectorates of the Cross, and the Black Emirates... What happened to them?

"They were absorbed by Christian capitalism."

"They lost or adapted. There is no escape in a closed environment. What did you call it in your time, Stahs?"

Zamoyski exhaled smoke from his lungs.

"Globalization."

"Globalization. Globalization is only the first manifestation of this fundamental, universal process, cosmologization. The race begins on the globe, but in the final analysis it is not about achieving the Perfect Form of a given planetary environment — but the Perfect Form of the universe, of all possible universes."

Rahab seemed to speak English fluently, telling Zamoyski the sociogonic theories here, and yet all this had first passed through the labyrinths of Code.

Adam was not even sure whether the ambassador was physically in Sol-Port. Probably not.

Through the smoke and through the honeyed chiaroscuro of the Three Crowns, wandering his gaze above the head of his interlocutor, Zamoyski saw the reflection of the neighboring salon in a tall mirror, and in it - four men gathered around a billiard table. They were not playing; they stood with glasses in their hands and talked about something in a low voice, with gloomy faces. One of them was P. G.; Zamoyski did not know the other two; he knew the fourth, but could not remember - from where. Golden hair, light eyes, a slim, Nordic face, a prominent apple... Zamoyski placed a hand-painted portrait of the golden-haired man on the first step of the ruins of the Roman villa.

“Duels, Prahbe.”

“Ah, duels. They are one of the elements of the HS Civilization. I will not discuss the rationality of your culture, Stahs, but as a means of preserving it, they are undoubtedly rational, perhaps even necessary — like Gnosis.”

Gnosis, thought Zamoyski, // delving into the hypertext of “Multithesaurus”. Gnosis both belongs and does not belong to the Civilization. It is the border, the Wall of China, the lock, the filter, and the osmotic cell membrane.

“So the ritual swinging of the sword is supposed to contribute to... what exactly? The preservation of humanity?”

“Those are the assumptions” Flame agreed.

“I have Tutankhamun with me. . . ”

“Ahh.”

”Of course, you have some interest in helping me” said Zamoyski, observing the shapes of the smoke — although it is hard for me to imagine what. You want me to believe that you met me here by accident? I won’t believe it. I could probably manifest myself in any public place, and you, Prahbe, would be there a minute later. Ready-made phren models, conversation simulations, psychological strategies—to approach, behave this way, say this and that... What subconscious thought was your story about the history of Civilization supposed to lead me to?”

Flame smiled melancholy.

“Maybe to this one...?”

“Didn’t I tell you? Whole strategies.”

“What are you doing right now, Stahs? How is our conversation different from any conversation between two Stahs? Models, simulations, strategies—all of this is swirling in your heads. But you don’t say them out loud.”

“How is it different? In that I can’t even imagine what you are thinking about Prahbe. When I talk to a person—I talk to myself behind the mask of someone else’s face. When I talk to you — behind the manifestation only a black abyss.”

“The black abyss offers you help, Stahs.”

“That’s what scares me.”

They were already grinning openly at each other: the white, mirthless smiles of hygienic predators.

“And what form would this help take?”

“A champion.”

”Excuse me?”

“As a Stahs challenged by an Inclusion, you have the right to present a champion. We can give you advice and contacts; we can provide the champion himself.

“A-a, champion, indeed” Zamoyski muttered, //reading the Code of Honor of the HS Civilization. ”Well, whatever your motives, at the moment I’m much more interested in Tutankhamun’s motives. Just please forgive me this sermon on Inclusions. That it’s the Heights of the Curve, so there’s no way to see through their thoughts, *et cetera*. What’s the matter with you?”

Flame folded their arms across their chest, pouting their lips.

“We’re considering various possibilities. Perhaps something from the Time Well—your name appears quite often in accounts of the future, Stahs. It may

have something to do with Stahs Judas McPherson. It could also be a political declaration. You don't harbor any suspicions?"

"I don't know em at all. My suspicions are primitive, what can e gain from my defeat?"

The ambassador raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"E won't get rich from this, will e?"

"How much for the redemption of the manifestation? One third of the estate?" Zamoyski's secundus was reading the Codex in a hurry. "But e'll choose the equivalent emself. What does that mean?"

"Maybe it's about your archives, your memory, Stahs?"

"Is it Narva again?" Moetle found some way to extract the secret from me "Tutankhamun simply wants to take over my brain. Maybe that's the reason..."

Or maybe it's just another of Heinlein's contralogy.

"Prahbe Flame!" Patrick Gheorg spoke up from above Zamoyski. "Are we dragging Stahs Zamoyski into the world of big politics?"

"He's already been dragged, I'm afraid" said the ambassador, standing up and bowing slightly to McPherson.

||You're not my guardian angel!|| Zamoyski snapped at P. G.

||I'm not your vassal either!|| Judas' secretary snapped back with surprising anger.

Meanwhile, Michał Flame managed to bow again and leave.

"Well, you've chased him away, congratulations" Zamoyski summed up.

The McPhersons' *MO* is becoming all too clear: to drag me out to some public place and expose me, unsuspectingly, to the fire of political players - first Słowiński's beach and Tutankhamun, now the "Three Crowns" and Flame. I wonder if they charge them for "fifteen minutes with a freak"?

Or maybe the plan is even more detailed? First, arrange a duel, and then provide me with a champion. Full control.

I need to study the law of the HS Civilization - what would they gain from it? Because something for sure.

P. G. looked around for the Prahbe

“Let me guess, they offered some favor.”

“Why exactly did Tutankhamun challenge me to a duel?”

“What did Phoebe Słowiński say?”

Zamoyski reached down to his memory. Control of the Flow, yes, that could also be the motive. But even if, having won, the Osca wants part of my Fields — that still won’t give em that control.

The behavior randomizer jerked Zamoyski’s arm and Adam jovially clapped Gheorg’s manifestation on the back. Of his own free will, he asked:

“Is there any way to manipulate the messages from the Time Well?”

Patrick nodded to Zamoyski.

“Come, you’ll see.”

They had barely left the “Three Crowns” (the club doors had not yet closed behind them and Zamoyski had not had time to look back at the bas-relief of the First Tradition), P. G. redirected them — into the void. Of course, it was not a truly empty void, but the void of Civilization, so it was filled with inf. True, in the case of such large spaces, the density of nanobots remained far lower than that required by planetary protocols; Patrick must have ordered local condensation a moment ago, because both of them had materially manifested themselves there without any delay, without even changing the manifestations themselves, Zamoyski still with a cigar in his teeth.

The absurdity of such representations no longer struck him with such force. Technology justifies culture. Whatever is possible will become — somewhere, sometime — the norm. Adam no longer really made any difference, AR and the Imperial Gardens or Farstone or space. Either way, everything was mediated.

There were no stars here. In the absence of light sources, Zamoyski should not have seen Patrick, or even himself; that he had seen was entirely due to the orthovirtual applications imposed by P. G. The same applications, at Gheorg’s

will, pulled out more objects from the darkness or sketched their outlines from scratch in OVR, when the objects themselves had no right to be visible at all.

||En-Port Gnosis|| they spoke ||suspended in Sol-Port, above the ecliptic. This is — do you see? — the Schwarzchild sphere of the black hole. Here, here, here — the Fang clusters. Around the poles of the hole and beyond — the inf detection networks. Now I superimpose the space-time matrix; you see the gradient of curvature.|| The Phoebe's manifestation indicated symbolic representations, as they appeared in the monolithic blackness. ||Tuning black holes into the form of Time Wells is a separate branch of meta-physics. The goal is to open temporal pockets that would allow entry from beyond the Schwarzchild into reversed time streams and exit from them just as safely.||

||Gravity, tidal forces?|| asked Zamoyski, careful not to show disbelief in his voice.

P. G. was superimposing temporal path lines on the image of the black hole. All of them were just outside the event horizon, deformed in time with the deformations of the hole itself, sometimes almost to a naked singularity.

||Of course, any objects of supramolecular dimensions would be torn apart, so in practice only information is transmitted to the past, usually encoded in changes in the intensity of the stream of particles shot into the Wells. The most popular are neutrinos, for obvious reasons. Information is pumped into the Wells continuously, even now.||

||Reports of the war with the Deformants are going into the past, about the Suzerain, about me... right?||

||Yes.||

||So why didn't anyone know the truth before and everyone got drawn into this conflict?||

||Who told you, Stahs, that no one did? We didn't; but that's a matter of the dispersion of our Wells. That's another problem, by the way, and also with assessing the probability of the future...||

Zamoyski sucked his cigar thoughtfully. It was warm — he could feel the warmth on his lips — but it no longer simulated inf smoke.

||I know it wasn't neutrinos, but — let's say we somehow shoot inf itself into the Well...||

||And!|| McPherson laughed. ||Nanomantic invasion! There were already such concepts. Of course, it would only make sense in the case of natural holes, because breaking through an invasive nano into such an En-Port, only a few decades earlier, wouldn't make much sense. Another thing is that mastering some one-time past doesn't make sense at all. What would that even give? No communication in the other direction. Even if this one nanobot digested the entire galaxy according to our recipe...||

||Is that possible?||

||What?||

||That one nanobot...||

He shrugged.

||Theoretically. In practice, there are always more of them anyway, you don't portion the infu molecule by molecule, even in minimal packets it goes into the billions and billions.||

Zamoyski gritted his teeth over his cigar. An invasion from a single nanobot!

Wait, that's...

He blinked.

||Farstone.||

After a few seconds, they were standing in the castle library. Angelica was reading at one of the counters and raised her head at the sight of them, the post-condensation movement of air ruffled her hair.

"Who manages the Nano Fields in De la Roche's Sak?" Zamoyski asked, smoothing the folds of his dark blue caftan into which it had formed after the transition from weightlessness to earth's gravity.

"Which nano?" Patrick sat down in an armchair, crossing his legs. "The imperial one or the illegal conspirators'?"

“It probably wasn’t imperial.”

”In that case — the Office.”

||Request for an urgent meeting with Phoebe Stern.||

||Phoebe Stern agrees and awaits the address|| replied the stage manager to Zamoyski, the last in the line of intermediaries between Adam’s anima and the Office’s Fields.||

||Here, now.||

Patrick Gheorg turned their head and a second later the manifestation of Phoebe Stern condensed under their gaze.

”Stahs.”

”Phoebe.”

They bowed to each other.

”It’s not very polite to run away with a conversation on the Plateau in the presence of a First Tradition Stahs” Angelica noted, closing the book. ”Especially in a Stahs’ house.”

”Of course, how dare we!” Zamoyski half-jokingly swore, whose mood instantly improved when he felt the initiative returning to him.

Angelica blinked, surprised by the tone, probably suspecting the work of a behavior randomizer.

Adam returned his gaze to Stern.

“Nano from the Sak.”

“Yes, I know. We took over the management of their Fields. But that nano is useless, it scattered them in the interstellar vacuum along with the remains of the Sak. The remains of the matter previously wrapped in it, to be precise.”

Zamoyski walked over to a single panel of wainscoting separating two library shelves; a gas lamp in the shape of an imperial dragon was mounted on it. He lifted the shade and lit his dead cigar a second time. It took him a moment to realize that he was actually lighting inf.

"Sowing them in the vacuum," he muttered. "What about a molecule?"

Phoebe Stern caught his thought in a flash.

"We didn't index every single nano-bot. What location do you have in mind, Stahs?"

"My hollow," Zamoyski said. "Trachea, esophagus, internal organs. I'm certain that contamination occurred; it practically stuffed itself down my throat."

He spat out smoke in disgust, fighting the memory of a splintered shred of the Pandemonium, sealing his face, flowing into his mouth, nose... Had I bitten it off, swallowed it?

"*In ovum Deformantum*," Stern began slowly, showing thoughtfulness, "in public space, without orientation... This is not inf, it does not index space-time on the Emperor's membranes."

"But can you isolate and identify these nano-bots?"

"If we obtain sufficient density at even one point, we can run a program on their Fields that will configure them into a DNA sequencer. We have the DNA pattern of your hollow, Stahs, so we would make a comparison. A positive result does not mean anything yet, you certainly left a lot of bio-waste in the remains of the Sak - next we would reconfigure the nanobots into chemical analyzers to describe their environment. Only then would we confirm the location in your hollow."

"Then..." Zamoyski raised his left index finger.

"Yes, I guess," Stern nodded. "A silent invasion."

"And me?" Angelica asked, resting her elbows on the table and placing her hands under her chin. She looked from Stern to Zamoyski. "I'm there too, right? I should also be contaminated."

Adam shrugged.

"It's possible."

"The algorithm would be the same," Stern assured.

"If I may" R. G. interrupted. "Stahs Angelica McPherson here is not the legal owner of the demonstration in question. Only Angelica McPherson of the original phren could give consent for a similar nano-operation on her hollow. Theoretically, you could obtain permission through the courts for a limited absentia administration of the second body, but it would take time, because the Stahs would be involved in the procedures."

"I have no way of talking to her without Francis hearing" said Zamoyski. "Besides, what 'nano-operations' are you talking about?"

"Didn't this Francis neutralize this nano by any chance?" asked Angelica at the same time.

Stern shook his head.

"It's unlikely, Stahs. I mean the nanobots in Stahs Zamoyski's hollow, because that's what the reward is for. The buyer wants to get the block with all the original information, so any interference by the Deformant in genetic, neural, chemical or any other structures could bring the revenge of the cheated buyer on Francis. I would bet that the Deformant refrains from any interference in the body of Stahs Zamoyski's hollow."

"Nano-operation?" Adam reminded.

"Primary material" Angelica muttered, looking to the side, clearly thinking about something else.

"Yes" Stern bowed stiffly to her. "In order to carry out an effective invasion of the Deformant, we must limit the reaction time of the Deformant as much as possible. This means attacking with the largest possible number of nanobots, already specialized. At the beginning, however, we would have only minimal portions. Where to get the matter for the necessary expansion of the arsenal? And in such a way that the Deformant would not notice it? Considering the location of the first-generation nano."

Zamoyski could not stop the reflex of hunching, contracting, his left hand raised to the height of his stomach, his sternum. The Randomizer immediately ordered him to take the cigar out of his mouth and whistle through his teeth, but that did not cover up Adam's mistake.

This is how one part of the mind betrays the other.

He tried to speak quickly and decisively now, in a voice without emotion, but he knew full well that both Phoebes had registered and analyzed his behavior.

"Are e going to eat me, or what?" he asked, flicking the ash into an ashtray standing on the shelf of the bookcase. "E'll eat me from the inside."

"Yes, that's the only way. It would be best to start with the maximum mass, but of course we have to set a limit: we'll take in as much matter that it won't threaten your hollow, Stahs."

"This will also rule out some methods of transmutation and reconfiguration," added P. G., "as causing harmful side effects for the organic environment, or precipitating toxic compounds. Restricting it to low-energy processes will significantly prolong the entire operation."

"What are the time estimates?" Zamoyski continued. "Because if the buyers arrive earlier, or at least those cubic octagons. . . "

"Two to seven k-hours" Stern replied immediately. "Maximum probability at one hundred and sixty-two k-minutes. Less with more energy-intensive transformation strategies."

"But we don't even know exactly how many of these starting nanobots there will be. Doesn't that matter?"

P. G. shook their head.

"Not in this kind of iterative process. Remember, Stahs, the parable of the payment to the inventor of chess? Grains of rice, he said, only as many as you would collect in total, going from square to square of the chessboard, if you put one grain on the first, and on each subsequent one twice as many as on the previous one; on the last one two to the sixty-fourth power. The moment when the person paying for the chess runs out of rice will come anyway, regardless of whether you started with one grain on the first square, or two, or three, or four. The constraints are always the same, and it is from them that we calculate the process parameters."

"I understand. But will we make it in time?"

"The chances are very good. We don't think the merchants will be that fast."

“Maybe instead of endlessly considering the possibilities,” Angelica muttered, “you could at least check if that nano is there at all.

“Just don’t hesitate now!” Zamoyski ordered himself.

He looked at Stern questioningly. The Phoebe made a brief movement with their eyes.

Adam raised his hand.

“Please.”

Stern bowed stiffly, saying nothing more.

They waited.

Zamoyski managed to bounce from almost euphoria (I make decisions! I surprise them! I choose the unexpected! I am free!) to despair (I will just manage to cheat Inclusions at something! Who will outdo superintelligences from universes specially designed for them in mental chess?), and back to adrenaline high (but they did not know! Only I have the knowledge necessary to draw the appropriate conclusions!)

Instinctively, however, he already kept his face dead and his body motionless, outside - the Lord of the Orient; inside - a black box, a secret indecipherable to plateau behavior analyzers. And that is how it should remain.

“Confirmed, one hundred percent,” Stern said suddenly. “So do I have your permission to start the operation, Stahs?”

Without hesitation!

“Yes,” Zamoyski said. ||I want continuous transmission in my Fields.||

||Of course|| assured Phoebe Stern. ||The Office guarantees you full access, Stahs.||

The Adam’s stage manager took care of the rest without asking, and a red and yellow cloud exploded under the ceiling. Zamoyski stared at it, fascinated (any insight into the interior of one’s own body is somehow childishly fascinating). However, he immediately realized that since others couldn’t see it - especially Angelica - his behavior was at least rude. All that was left for him to

do was to either lead the simulation to the inner Fields or bring the secundus here.

He chose the latter option, and from then on, through the eyes of an invisible anima, he watched the progress of the nano-plague in the entrails of his body - while he sat down in the armchair to Patrick's left with the primus.

Stern stood in the same place where he had been configured, motionless, with his hands behind his back and his head tilted slightly. Zamoyski guessed that this was a customary posture signaling the perceptor moving beyond the manifestation, or at least a partial withdrawal of attention.

//Zamoyski did not take his eyes off the cloud. It consisted of two colors: yellow and red. The yellow was paler, spreading out more widely, into various organic shapes with blurred edges. It was the background for the nano managed by the Office, showing how much was known about this environment based on its interactions with the environment. Drops of red marked the places where the nanobots were activated, the beginnings of the invading army. Over time, the yellow grew and the red grew. At first, the former much faster, but when the cloud took on the rough outline of a human torso, the process stopped; by then the red was already spreading like wildfire.

What does that really mean: "enough so that it doesn't pose a threat to the hollow"? Zamoyski wondered. Will I be an Auschwitz skeleton or what? How much fat and muscle mass do they plan to use? After all, it's mostly water. What kind of nanobots can be built from hydrogen and oxygen atoms?

Meanwhile, Zamoyski was looking at Angelica McPherson. She quickly caught his eye and that's how their wordless dialogue began.

She caught his eye - but didn't lower her hands folded under her chin.

He raised his left eyebrow slightly.

She ran her finger across her cheek.

He smiled with the corner of his mouth.

She pursed her lips and nodded slightly.

He gestured to the Phoebes.

She smiled broadly.

In response, he smiled just as openly.

Her black hair covered her face, she had to tuck it behind her ears; continuing to move, she straightened up behind the desk.

Zamoyski feigned cold seriousness, lowered his clasped hands into his lap, hung his head.

Angelica touched her temple with a straightened finger, a caricature of contemplation.

He acted out a sudden sleepiness: his eyelids were heavy, the muscles of his face were relaxing, he was falling asleep.

She laughed out loud.

“Oh no!” She stood up. “Mr. Zamoyski, if you will allow me.”

She took him by the arm (he already knew this gesture from the McPhersons), led him out of the library. The door had barely closed behind them when he saw both manifestations of the Phoebes disintegrate into nothingness.

They went out into the hall and onto the terrace. At this hour the castle seemed deserted, not a living soul in sight.

They turned toward the stables.

“Horseback riding?” he became worried. “I can still feel the African rides in my bones!”

“I am certain that you can configure your manifestation in such a way that it does not transmit certain stimuli and assumes the best riding posture.”

He consulted with the stage manager. The appropriate programs were available on the public Fields. He copied them and launched them,

“Two hours, there is some time” said Angelica. “Are you sure you have nothing more urgent to do?”

“Oh, many things. I have invitations from various personalities and organizations, I do not know any of them, I have to check on the public ones; and

all the invitations are urgent. I will appear in some open location, diplomats of inhuman empires are pestering me. A superintelligence not from this universe has challenged me to a fencing duel. A metaphysical beast is chasing me inside my head and vows my death. I am sitting in the belly of a treacherous god of the void and waiting for him to bid on me; and in my belly an invisible army is growing from my body. Of course I prefer the ride. Did Judas order you to seduce me?"

She snorted.

"What a question!"

"Hmm?"

"Stupid. No answer will satisfy you anyway."

"I'm watching your reaction."

"Unless it is so. Then you're welcome."

She chose two piebalds. Zamoyski loaded the appropriate program and saddled his mount almost instinctively, not looking at the movements of his hands. The animals were not geniuses — or at least they didn't speak.

They slowly circled the lake and delved into the sparse forest covering the hills behind the estate. Zamoyski consciously tried to stop counting the passing time. To forget himself, to let the night consume him — that was the best way out, that was all he had left now.

"Relax" Angelica told him. "I see you are constantly on guard, almost ready to jump, as if at any second the sky could fall on your head."

"Because that's how it is!" Zamoyski snorted. "Maybe! It was falling until now."

"All the more reason for you to relax. Look, the night is so nice."

"Very warm."

"Stop. Do you hear this silence?"

"It's a forest."

"Yes." She took a breath. "Take advantage of it. These are the privileges of your position. The ease of escaping into bliss, into places of absolute peace. Reverse your way of thinking, it's not you who moves in the world, it's the world that moves before you, like a perforated tape, and you choose which fragment to latch the reader of your soul on."

"Stahs." He patted the horse's neck. "I'm a Stahs. An aristocrat. Is that how I should think?"

"Exactly. What, don't you like that word? Aristocracy is necessary."

"You are trying to freeze culture in an artificial state here."

"Freeze a person. Humanity."

"It comes to the same thing."

"Does it outrage you? Why?"

"I don't know. It seems to me somehow... calculated, ruthless. Social engineering. It has bad associations."

"Didn't they tell you? Every Progress inevitably draws towards the UL."

"They did. Actually... you told me."

"Ah." She raised her gaze to the starless sky. "Me. Well, yes. So you know — if it weren't for Civilization, you would only find Phoebes and Inclusions here after your resurrection; there would be no more Stahs. Well, maybe a few zoological specimens."

"But did you have to go straight into all those pseudo-feudal rituals?"

"There wasn't much choice. In an economy based on inf, in an economy of arbitrary distribution of infinity, feudalism remains a stable system. Democracy — no. You feel sorry for democracy?"

They rode out into a clearing bathed in moonlight. Halfway through it was a long, narrow birch trunk, blown down by one of the recent gales.

Angelica jumped off her horse, tied the reins and rested on the trunk, stretching her legs. She hadn't changed for riding, she was in loose, white trousers

and leather slippers.

Zamoyski sat down next to her with a groan.

“Democracy,” he sighed. “The system of government itself doesn’t move me much, but - you can’t separate them. If you choose feudalism - for one reason or another - then you also choose the entire system of values that is connected with it and results from it. The entire ethics. And aesthetics.”

He slid off the trunk onto the ground; now he could lean back and look the Moon in the face. The cloud in the library was already a dense cluster of red, fringed with yellow. Adam’s Primus shifted his gaze to the right and down: Angelica had the same half-amused, half-astonished expression.

“In a democracy, for example, I could now lay my head on your lap; but in feudalism,”

“Oh no!” she laughed. “What’s stopping you?”

“What do you mean? It’s not proper!”

She ruffled his hair.

“Really? What if,”

A wind blew and they knew.

They turned their gazes to the condensing vortex.

“Stahs,” Stern bowed stiffly. “Stahs. It’s Time.”

Angelica withdrew her hand from Zamoyski’s head. Adam stood up, dusting off his trousers and jacket.

“What should I know?”

“We’ve sent the full package to your Fields, Stahs.”

||Accept and open.||

||Done.||

He redirected the secundus from the library into a single-sense construct,

based on data transmitted directly from the Fields of the Office. The construct contained the visualization of the nanoarmy and its immediate surroundings, as well as instructions on how to behave during the invasion of Francis. The instructions were written out for probable scenarios of events, from total defeat to total victory — megabytes of text.

"Are you coming?" Angelica asked.

"Do I have another option? I haven't moved that far along the Curve," Zamoyski replied. "I have to go back to the hollow."

Stern shook his head.

"Not necessarily, Stahs."

"Excuse me?"

"You can hand this manifestation over to your secundus."

"It's just an anima."

"There are programs."

"Yeah, I don't doubt it," Zamoyski muttered. "There are for everything."

"What programs?"

"Do you want to Download?"

||*Freeware*?||

||Some.||

||Give them to me.||

Zamoyski remembered the next few minutes as a time of great chaos. The mere redirection of the manifestation caused a powerful disorientation; for a split second it seemed to him that primus and secundus were both sitting in the same nanomat. In addition, Adam had to assign his secundus the simulation of the Office - and now a yellow-red cloud was shining in the dark sky above the clearing.

At the same time, he was waking up in his body inside the Fang, inside the

Deformant. It was not a pleasant awakening. In the meantime, his hollow had drifted into one of the balls of liquid gold; only animal reflexes kept his head beyond the border of the liquid. Due to the weak air circulation, a bubble of carbon dioxide swelled around this head and Zamoyski, having returned to his biological manifestation, fell into a state of feverish intoxication.

Which was all the more worrying, because earlier (before the redirection) he had not felt any symptoms of poisoning. This raised worrying questions about the state of Zamoyski's brain: to what extent was Adam's mind processed only on the organic organ of his hollow, and to what extent on the implant grown into it?

There was no point of support, nothing for Zamoyski to grab onto, the sudden movements only shattered the golden bulb into a cluster of smaller and larger drops.

"Angelica!" he shouted.

She was out of sight.

"Angelica!"

||How?|| she asked.

He sat down on the tree trunk again.

||You've disappeared somewhere.||

||Give me my regards.||

||Angelica!||

But Francis manifested emself more quickly as a monk. He grabbed Zamoyski by the hand and pulled him towards the nearest cluster of navy blue growths.

"Bad dreams?"

"Terrible, Zamoyski muttered, turning parallel to the monk's vertical."

In the night sky, the Office painted maps of the planned plague, showing the saboteur the way in the inner jungle of Deformant. From vine to vine, from flower to flower, Adam began to flow through the Fang. The manifestation of

Francis accompanied him for a moment, then disappeared somewhere.

Finally, Zamoyski stopped, compared his position with the chart above the tops of trees moved by the wind, caught his foot on some purple roots - and began to cough.

Expectorant spasms bent him in half, he coughed and coughed, his throat burned, he ran out of breath... He watched as the red exploded in fiery fireworks on the empty star-slope.

“What’s wrong with you?”

Sleepy Angelica swam towards him from behind the wall of large leaves.

“That’s all you need to get sick... You really do look sick.” She put her hand to his forehead. “Damn, fever.”

Because he wasn’t feeling too good either. He had stopped coughing, he was just breathing deeply. If the visualization of the Office was to be believed, most of the army had left his body. The Angels were watching him closely, with almost equal concern on their faces.

What exactly is the limit of safe mass extraction from the body? To Zamoyski, all this nanotransmutation magic seemed fundamentally suspicious, similar to cognitive mind-copying spells. He accepted the rules announced to him more or less in the same way as one accepts theological axioms. Of course, the difference was that here the rules could be tested in action — but before they were proven, he doubted each one. However, he had learned not to betray these doubts. He waited in silence for the development of events.

According to the scenario, the Deformant should have realized the attack within seconds. Then the scenario branched into several variants of Francis’s reaction. One of them included immediate autoamputation of the infected fragment (along with Fang and its passengers) and its active decomposition, down to the level of molecular soup. Other variants, however, gave Adam a better chance of survival.

The OVR clock counted down the k-seconds of invasion. Zamoyski subconsciously expected an angry manifestation of Francis; of course, nothing of the sort happened.

“Do you perhaps have some medical analyzer in your implant memory?” Angelica asked, pulling him toward the blue buds. “It’s a shame we’re still cut off from Plateau. The devil knows what you could have caught. Here, drink this.”

Forty, fifty seconds. Still nothing. Some of the scenarios disappeared from the sky above the forest, the shape of the probability curves changed. //Zamoyski watched the cloud growing above him. The yellow was almost reaching the moon, the red was following close behind - either multiplying so quickly or simply expanding from its previous state of condensation. Sixty, seventy.

||So?|| whispered Angelica, leaning on the trunk to look Adam in the eye.

He just raised his open hand.

Eighty, ninety. There was a hiss, the wind stirred the Deformant’s insides.

“What’s going on?” Angelica asked; grabbing a liana. She looked around.

“Decompression,” Zamoyski told her. “Somewhere it ate through them.”

“What...?”

“Cadmus’ army.”

The wind stopped. It was, however, a short-lived calm, because suddenly the entire jungle shook, Zamoyski and Angelica flew down, on them - torn-off organic masses, and everything was flooded by a golden rain.

||We’re running away|| said Adam. His secundus, because the primus lay crushed by a great weight (a weight that grew with every moment), under a mountain of mud and organic remains, and was barely catching its breath.

He began to crawl out from under this attack with difficulty. Individual plants/organs of the Deformant were still trembling, pushing themselves into Zamoyski’s eyes, ears, nose, mouth. He bit them and spat them out. The mud that stuck to him had a strange color, by no means gold or black - closer to blue.

Angelica must have seen the tension—maybe pain—on his face, because she squeezed his arm reassuringly and whispered:

||It'll work.||

The whisper seemed most appropriate in the night's silence.

Finally, Adam crawled out of the mound of organic waste into the fresh air. He immediately started coughing: it might have been fresh, but it was full of thick dust, settling very slowly.

||Are we the ones controlling the drive?|| Stern asked.

The Phoebe lifted their head, straightened up. If the "we" surprised them, they didn't show it.

||Yes. Some of the nanobots organized themselves in the Fang's info-channels into structures independent of Plateau: we have to protect ourselves in case of another cutoff by the Wars.||

||What do we have?||

||Maneuvering engines, Stahs. The Kraft generator and exotic matter supply the Deformant devoured and swallowed whole.||

|| A fucking looter. That's where this space comes from.||

He lifted his /head and //head. The interior of the Fang was now much larger than his control cabin - at least forty meters separated Adam standing at the bottom from the top of the cone, where the light was coming from. The light was dim, obscured by the webs of vines and other, lighter plants/organs of Francis, hanging from the converging walls there.

The red in the sky divided into two parts, the smaller of which had the shape of a cone and was no longer surrounded by a single patch of yellow; the larger, on the other hand, spread from horizon to horizon, rivers and streams of carmine flowing here through clouds of pale sepia - the Deformant was enormous, Adam remembered those thousands of cubic kilometers of garnet, celadon and gold, Wagner's symphony of the BODY.

||Will there be a shrigal?||

||There's no way|| assured Stern. ||Now e's fighting for eir life.||

The flood of the sky by red was stopped, however; it even seemed that the

bile was slowly regaining the lost spaces.

Suddenly, from the mound of Francis' corpses, a terrifying scream erupted, almost from under Zamoyski's very feet. He jumped back. A hand and a face appeared, covered in blue mud, and it was not at all immediately that Adam understood that it could be no one else but Angelica, laboriously digging herself out of the heart attack. She screamed, spitting sludge and tearing at the loops of vines, and she could have kept tearing at them for a long time, breaking her nails, cutting her fingers, because there was no thought in her desperate movements, only pure hysteria - she behaved like a person going under water, a drowned person on their last breath.

When Adam caught her by the wrist and the collar of her shirt, she first tried to break away from him, probably not recognizing him, or maybe not even seeing him: her eyes were empty, her gaze unfocused.

At least she finally stopped bothering Zamoyski and he pulled her to the surface.

Adam tired of this unexpectedly, though. He fell on his back, panting heavily, the dust swirling above him in high spirals.

Angelica was still making strange sounds, her scream turned into a rattling wheeze, then into a hoarse, irregular breathing, interrupted by loud sniffles, the blue paint on her face blurred into diagonal stripes - and in a sudden attack of embarrassment Adam realized that she was crying.

He looked at Angelica sitting next to him on the birch trunk.

||I knew everything would be all right|| she said, squeezing his hand. ||There's too much about you from the Well for you to end up so miserable!|| she laughed heartily.

He turned onto his side, embraced the sobbing girl with an arm wrapped in plant and animal fibers. She didn't pull away, and that was a good sign.

He didn't know what to say to her, so he didn't say anything. He waited until her breathing calmed down. Gradually, she focused her gaze on him.

He reached out to wipe the colored residue from her face. At that, she smiled uncertainly. He smiled back.

||It's good,|| he said, rising from the tree trunk and stretching his arms above his head. ||How's the oxygen?||

||It won't be a problem,|| Stern replied. ||That's enough. Besides, now we can create our own refreshment cells.||

||This dust?||

||We're precipitating the remains of the Deformant nanofield.||

Angelica wiped tears from her eyes. He opened his mouth to tell her the good news (she knew nothing, not about his connection with Plateau, nor about the war with the Suzerain and the peace with the Deformants, nor even about Francis's betrayal) - but she pressed her fingers to his lips before he uttered a word. She was still blinking, the dust irritated her already irritated eyes. Fat mass stuck to her long black hair.

The gravity was still increasing, they were accelerating, moving away from the Kraftoid; it must have exceeded 1 g already — /Zamoyski had neither the strength nor the desire to get up. They lay motionless, Francis' nanobots, condensed into patches of gray dirt, settled on them in a thin layer of warm snow. Silence reigned inside Fang, even greater in the clearing, because of the seal of night.

Angelica was now watching him from a distance of a dozen or so centimeters. With a great effort of will he refrained from rolling over on his back, averting his gaze, lowering his eyelids. It seemed that she read that uncertainty, that shame in his eyes, because she raised a questioning eyebrow. It was an exact copy of her expression from the Farstone library, a few hours ago.

He thought "I'll kiss her". Of course, once again, it wasn't spontaneous, so he felt the banality of the situation before he even made the first move - but he did, reaching for her neck with his left hand and bringing his face closer to hers.

She stopped him, tightening her fingers on her bicep, pushing him away slightly.

"Mr. Zamoyski," she whispered, pouting her lips, "there are certain forms!"

He laughed quietly.

"What do you mean, you can't even kiss in your Civilization? What kind of Victorianism is this?"

"Oh, Victorianism!" She smiled wider.

"Forms, forms" he mumbled, feigning anger. "Now they'll enforce some stupid etiquette here, *savoir-vivre* mechanical! Alone in the devastated Fang, closest to us — Deformant, a hundred-kilometer beast, no one even knows what species it comes from, human or not, and beyond that only light-years of vacuum, and absolute vacuum at that, because after that galaxy collapse only a collection of black holes and clouds of free gas remained here, so it's possible that we're the only people in the whole of open space, apart from the Ports — and you're talking about forms here, you're defending me from a kiss! What paranoia!"

"But it doesn't matter whether we're the last people or not."

"Really? 'A society of two' — that's something new!"

She ran her thumb over his lips.

"Victorianism, you say... The Victorian lover trembled with excitement at the sight of his fiancée's calf. In cultures that allow everything, nothing excites even in complete exposure, there is no shame and no rapture; the body is a tool, the body is an object. My hollow, your hollow. There is no secret among naked phrenes. The more you can, the less you desire. The easier the fulfillment, the poorer the satisfaction."

"The greatest debauchery would be to lock yourself in an ascetic cell for half a century, and then smell your lover's handkerchief. Ha!"

He turned over on the soft bed of steaming and still warm corpses, Francis; turning, he pulled Angelica with him. She wanted to break away, but he didn't let go. She tugged at his matted beard. He made a threatening face.

"Grrr. I am the primitive ape-man, a body fetishist. You are already free spirits. Since I opened my eyes here, I have been constantly hearing, 'the body is just a manifestation', 'the body is not you', 'it's just a hollow' and the like."

Having said that, he recalled the meeting with Słowiński, just a manifestation, and thought, maybe they really are trying to create a taboo here by force, in order to preserve the possibility of feeling in these times of omnipotence - to

feel what I feel now. It is some kind of definition of humanity, not the worst, I guess.

“Because it’s true,” whispered Angelica, resting her head on Zamoyski’s chest. “The body is organic clothing. The body is not you. Of course, you may like a specific cut, style, aesthetics of a given designer, you may become attached to a specific piece and identify with it to some extent - but you don’t lose your identity by losing your shoes, do you?”

“Then make up your mind – is the body just an object or not?” He brushed her hair away from her face, his rough hand closed around her neck, he felt the rhythm of her pulse under his thumb, the blood flowing in the artery.

“Don’t you understand? Technology imposes laws on us, but we in turn impose laws on technology.” She blew into his eyes.

He blinked.

“In other words, you’re pretending.”

“All of culture is based on pretending that we’re cultured.”

||WHEN will our cubic octagons take over?|| Angelica asked Phoebe Stern.

||Still nothing certain. In calculating the position of the Fang, we can only rely on the memory of the constellation image that Stahs Zamoyski provided us, but that gives us a very large area. And as for the time of arrival of the competition’s Universal Ports - there is a complete lack of data.||

||Don’t put too much trust in the Wells|| Zamoyski told Angelica, approaching the horses. He stroked his mount’s neck. The steed lowered its head and sniffed Adam, probably intrigued by his lack of odor. ||Everything could still end badly.||

She stood up, reached into the saddlebags, found sugar. The animals began to eat it from her hand. Their natural greed improved her mood even more.

||Don’t be such a pessimist. So far, you’ve been doing great.||

||Said the astronaut falling into a black hole, and indeed, he endured another

hundred thousand years without blinking an eye.||

||We send each other letters through black holes. Come on, smile.||

In fact, he was smiling — with his primus. The secundus was showing seriousness and concern.

||Reason coldly, I don't have much chance of survival. Don't make such faces. I'm serious. I'm leaving aside the whole Deformant affair and the auction — but the Suzerain will surely catch up with me sooner or later. You may think that you are at war with him, but for now he has only taken action against Judas, me and Moetle, and he has only made personal promises of death to me. How do you defend yourself against an enemy who can at any moment descend on the Inf Fields and set up a tank division, a tornado, Godzilla against me?||

||Fact|| they grimaced ironically. ||Frequent phren records are highly recommended in this situation.||

||Oh, but that's even worse, he can manipulate me in the direct Flows of my archives to my Fields however he wants and I will never know about it, no safeguards will protect me, no cryptography, to the keys of which he has just as easy access, no hidden copies. Is there some one hundred percent sure way, Phoebe?||

||No.||

||You see for yourself. It's better to stick to the body. But the body is threatened by burning Masai women and other inf dolls. Only one thing would give me a chance in this fight, the key to the inf protocols. I think that's where we'll start this Lodge meeting they invited me to. Do you have any more sugar?||

||You don't realize what you're saying, Stahs!|| Stern's voice rose. ||Such power will never be granted to a single person!||

||But to a single Inclusion, yes.|| The behavior randomizer imposed a plaintive tone and expression on //Zamoyski. ||What, Phoebe?||

||Unjustified claims|| they said, approaching Adam. ||No one here has fooled you with egalitarian visions, Stahs. The Progress Curve is a picture of the hierarchy of the aristocracy of the mind. You wouldn't trust a monkey with the command of the army defending your homeland; even the best trained monkey.||

||Because I know... If all the powers of the world were fighting an Armageddon battle for it and with it... and Nostradamus made numerous prophecies about it...||

Zamoyski put his hand with sugar under his mount's muzzle. At first he was afraid of its teeth, but then he thought with drunken courage: oh well, at most he'll bite off the hand of manifestation, this is not my body.

My body—my only possessions, if we don't count those virtual Logical Fields, bought with the deposit from Słowiński. What exactly did the ambassador of the Rahabs suggest...? The winner of a duel, according to the Code of Honor of the Civilization of Homo Sapiens, is entitled to one third of the property of the defeated, and the choice of that one third belongs to the winner. Osca Tutankhamun had clearly read something about me from eir Time Well and suddenly valued my block so high that e even went so far as to break custom, risking ostracism; duels between citizens from different parts of the Curve were frowned upon here. But what could be hidden in my block? It's just an organic puppet, grown by Gnosis using the standard method. The only original thing is the brain, its contents: the mind. So we're back to my memory again. The coordinates of Narva. Was that really what I was after...? Let's assume not. Is there an alternative? What other treasures lie buried in my subconscious...? He smiled under his mustache, feeding the animal.

Suddenly the smile froze on his lips. The flame of the ebony-skinned woman! Discontinuity! Into the body, but not into the body! As if - as if I were some kind of kraftoid, a walking labyrinth of time and space, like the labyrinth in the twisted African Sak: invisible lands at your fingertips, you will pass through, but the light does not leak out, selective tears in reality, intelligent Kraftware.

He got his face under control. Angelica gave him another handful of sugar. His hands were sticky as if greased with tar from the sugar and the horse's saliva.

The Sak. (He was thinking quickly now, as quickly as possible, so as not to let himself fall apart in a series of associations.) Sak. Or something very similar. But how to check that?

He kissed Angelica on the forehead.

"Hmm?"

“Do you remember what you told me about the methods of anchoring Saks in open space?”

“Oh, Hooks. On Hooks. That’s what that little guy De la Roche was talking about. What’s the deal?”

“Don’t you know how to tell? I mean from outside the Sak.”

“Excuse me? Didn’t you mistake me for a professor of metaphysics again?”

“Never mind, sorry.”

He leaned back against a large, navy blue leaf (or maybe a flap of skin), closed his eyes.

||Saks, Hooks, detection, operating procedures, practice. Without revealing the source of the query|| he told the stage manager and immediately thought about it: if my primus is in the Fang, secundus in Sol-Port, then who is talking to the program? How? Am I splitting into three? Is it really impossible to stop this...?

||Please. To what level should I summarize?||

||Mine, mine.||

||I don’t know you well enough yet|| the manager objected.

||Oh God... Okay, let’s start with the questions. Are there any limitations to what can and can’t serve as a Hook?||

||Theoretically, no.||

||What exactly is a Hook? I’d like a definition.||

||An object or set of objects above the atoms whose quantum state has been bound to the power node maintained by the Sak’s Fangs.||

||So that excludes living organisms, in which there is a constant exchange of matter.||

||No one is forcing you to attach a Hook to all the molecules of an organism.||

||Let’s say I suspect that a given object is a Hook. How can I check that?||

||By breaking the object into free plasma. By reducing it to absolute zero. Or by comparative nuclear magnetic resonance.||

||That's great. Two of these methods are deadly, and the third requires equipment that... Wait. Could nanomats be configured for similar scanning?||

||Imperial — yes. Others — it depends, but almost certainly also: if not in the first, then in one of the next generations.||

||I understand. Let's assume that the suspicion was confirmed. How, with his Hook, could he open the Sak from the outside?||

||Theory speaks of only one way. By destroying the Hook.||

||But how?||

||At least with a thermonuclear furnace, I'm afraid.||

In the meantime, they had already left Francis far behind; conserving fuel, they drifted at a constant speed and the Deformant's bio-pulp began to fill the inside of the Fang again, all it took was a jerk of the body, a poorly aimed bounce, too energetic a movement. Besides, every movement brought to life herds of navy blue, green, red waste. It seemed that in this way the Deformant was coming back to life: it was all still fresh, the juices were still flowing from the torn stalks (or blood from the rye), the moist skin was shining. The movement precipitated and lifted up drops of viscous fluids, previously golden, now dirty yellow, brown. Zamoyski chased them away as if from intrusive flies.

They walked through the forest, leading the horses by the reins. Angelica looked thoughtfully at her feet, kicking stones and branches. Adam continued his broken conversation with Stern, occasionally raising his eyes to check the progress of the nanobotic war. The conversation revolved around the issue of giving Zamoyski the key to the inf protocols. Adam understood that the very fact that the Phoebe was returning to this topic and pressing him, asking about the conditions, limitations - indicated that the idea was not so absurd. Stern represented the Office in the conversation, but probably also certain factions in the Lodge, and they certainly conveyed Zamoyski's position to them; the Office itself was a *de facto* emanation of the Emperor. Zamoyski, however, sincerely doubted whether the mighty of this world valued his life so highly solely on the basis that the Suzerain was after it. So he steered towards more current topics.

Would the Office not be kind enough, for example, to perform certain minor intra-tissue nano surgeries at Adam's request? He was of course aware that the superintelligences of the Office would immediately guess the rest of the plan from the content of the request itself. But perhaps they would be all the more willing to fulfill it.

Indeed, before they went down to the lake, Zamoyski received confirmation that numerous protein complexes placed in the brain and along the spine of Adam's hollow body remained frozen in their quantum states.

Zamoyski's primus did not feel the scan being performed. However, he noticed (finally cleared of dust) a momentary condensation of a dark gray suspension in the air. For a few seconds, a thick fog surrounded him on all sides, until Angelica screamed in fear, thinking that these were Francis's posthumous convulsions, more signs of the decay of the surroundings.

He only just told her what had actually happened, about the Suzerain and the Deformant's betrayal, and about the lifting of the Plateau blockade.

In his haste, he said one word too many and she also extracted information about her implementation in the new hollow from him. That moved her the most.

"Tell me not to throw myself too much," she snorted. "No big undertakings, let him not get involved in anything, just sit quietly in Farstone. The synthesis will be difficult anyway. How long is that, half a year? ||You say not to move from Farstone."

Angelica the Second laughed loudly.

||Tell her that I wish her a quick and painless death.||

Zamoyski repeated, noticing the difference in their ways of relating to each other.

"The same to you" replied Angelica the First. "When I remember what Forry went through after synthesis... Schizophrenia."

||I hope she didn't have any traumatic experiences.||

"Tell her that I became a cannibal."

While Angelica was bantering with herself, an army of nanosurgeons were ripping Zamoyski apart. Stern ordered him to try not to move during this time. Adam was hanging in the air, his feet caught in a tangle of branches and lianas, his hands at his torso.

The trepanation was performed on the politician. So he didn't see the wound - which was short and narrow, by the way. It soon healed, and the scar faded and disappeared under her hair. Nano was closing the door behind her. The wounds on his back were more spectacular, but they were hidden by his shirt; and when the shirt was torn, they were already healing.

Zamoyski didn't even feel most of these operations. A slight burning of the skin on the back of his neck and a feeling of coldness along his spine - no more. In the end, he didn't even feel it. Tugging on the vines, he turned in a slow pirouette. He searched for the Hook with his eyes, not knowing what he was looking for. Was that mist moving away from him, the delicate, gray-red gauze - was that it? The flesh of his body? It disappeared from his sight immediately.

Stern confirmed the successful completion of the operation.

Next, the nanomats had to break through all of the Fang's coatings, and not at the same time, so as not to cause dehermetization. Then, in a vacuum, at a safe distance from Fang, they would initiate a chain reaction in heavy isotopes. The right isotopes were easiest to obtain - from the Public Fields ///Zamoyski caught information that some of the Fangs' components were running on 238U/235U.

Nevertheless, all this had to take time. In the meantime, the enemy *octagons*[3] were getting closer with every second. At any moment, Adam and Angelica could be engulfed by the Death Civilization of one of the competitors for the prize of Zamoyski's hollow.

They reached the lake; here they mounted their horses again. The manifestation of Stern, until then faithfully accompanying them, dissipated in the air. Zamoyski also took off the OVR sky application: Fang had already moved away from the Deformant's corpse so far that on this scale almost nothing could be seen. The nanotic war was still going on there and its outcome remained an open question.

Returning to the castle, they were silent during the ride. Angelica looked at

Adam from time to time questioningly and hesitantly. He would respond with an equally questioning look - then she would look away.

If the Gnosis *octagons*[3] of did not reach them first, Angelica the First would probably die. Then there would be no need to synthesize her mind with the mind of the Second - but also the thought of her own death, however conventional and after all not personally experienced, sent cold shivers through the girl, despite all the jokes and nonchalance.

Dawn was approaching. They were descending from the hills. Zamoyski wondered about the sense of updating the record of his phren. The implant in his brain was sufficiently developed. The last archivings had been made before he was granted citizenship, they had become very outdated. (Who was I then? - who am I now?)

But - the Suzerain. Can we even trust these records, their authenticity? Let's say that Adam dies and they imprint him into a new hollow - if the Suzerain manipulates the archiving of the phren, Zamoyski might wake up as someone completely different. Not Zamoyski. In other words, in truth, he will not wake up at all. Instead, some new entity will arise, a personality constructed ad hoc, a forgery of memory and character — although unrecognizable as such even to himself.

Besides, it should be remembered that the Suzerain could read this archive "dry", for example by copying it to Purgatory.

Isn't that how he learned about Narva — from Moetle's archive?

||If you had a choice...|| Adam hesitated.

They were leaving the forest.

||Yes?||

||These Phoebes who modify themselves... How does it actually work? They decide that they prefer themselves to be different, and reprogram themselves. Having reprogrammed, in a new grid of fears and desires, they choose another form of phren. And so on, and so forth, endlessly; and all sincerely. Can they predict themselves in advance and simulate the state of their mind after x transformations? In state N they desire state N+1, but also N+10, N+100? Yet they are equally inevitable. A path of change, where each change forces another, and

although we consciously decide only on the closest one, because that is the only one we can predict - in fact we also decide on all our later decisions... So where does identity lie in this process? Or maybe it is no longer a state, but precisely this process itself?||

||In the case of open Inclusions - most certainly.||

||In that case, how long is this section on the line of transformations? Where does it end, where does the new one begin - a new personality?||

||Do you think it's different with Civilizations?|| With a jerk she threw her hair back, took a deep breath, straightening in the saddle. ||Do you now understand the necessity of adhering to certain conventions, however absurd at first glance? Stahs.||

A castle loomed before them, bathed in the rays of the rising sun, still barely making it through the branches of the trees. Banners waved in the morning wind. //Zamoyski opened the image from the external cameras of the Fang in the bluing sky, transmitted by the Office Fields. Just as they entered the long shadow of the castle, a short, almost blinding light flashed there amidst the starry darkness, after which several new stars appeared in the silver tapestry - one very close, very bright - a sun in the shape of a spindle.

A few moments later Zamoyski was split in half.

Narva

CODE

A generator of linguistic structures that is the basis for communication between Civilizations, Progressions, and Deformants.

↳A single generalization of the generative grammars of all forms of intelligent life is not possible. Different versions of the Code can exist in the same universe.

↳Subcodes of individual Progressions, Civilizations, and Deformation trends can be treated as derivatives of the Code, and *vice versa*.

↳The subcode of Progress and Civilization of Homo Sapiens is the Chomsky Matrix.

↳The Code does not exist in the form of a language that Stahs could use. Each practical development of the Code requires growing new structures-language processes from it.

↳Compounds are linguistic phrenes grown from individual Subcodes.

"Multithesaurus" (HS Subcode)

HALFWAY down the half-kilometer ladder, where gravity could already be clearly felt, Zamoyski was suddenly and unexpectedly attacked by childhood memories; they fell upon him in a dense swarm.

He stopped, wrapping his arms around a wide rung. In this way, he did not block Angelica's path, because she was the first to descend. The sight of her was supposed to calm Moetle, who after all remembered Zamoyski only as a puppet deprived of memory under the strict management of the Gnosis semi-inclusion.

Meanwhile, Adam's memory was working better and better. For example, he remembered that he had fallen off a ladder and broken his leg. It had happened during a vacation in the country (at his grandparents'?). Someone was chasing him and Adam, trying to quickly climb up to the barn's attic, fell from a height of four meters onto a wooden crate. A compound fracture. Before he lost consciousness, he managed to see a red and white bone piercing his skin.

If he fell now, it wouldn't end with a mangled leg. But he probably couldn't fall off that ladder either, after each step down he was entangled in an elastic network of mini-fibers, from which he had to forcefully tear himself free.

They wondered whether they shouldn't set up something like an elevator, but in the end the two-raven advised them against it, showing how much longer it would take - and time was still against them, they didn't know when the first octagon$^3 wouldarrive, orwhoseoctagon^3 itwouldbe$.

On the other hand, a few hundred meters up the ladder, and in partial weightlessness on top of that - is no walk in the park. When Zamoyski finally jumped down onto the atrium floor, which was sprinkled with water from a nearby fountain, the muscles in his arms and legs were burning him like living fire. For a moment he leaned his back against the ladder. Tilting his head back, he followed two parallel straight lines with his gaze to the zenith - to the Fang suspended in the blue. Torn from the Port of the kidnappers, then driven into Francis, half-digested by the menu and torn in turn from the yen of living flesh - it was nothing like the ideal cone, the immaculate geometrical mass that Zamoyski had first seen above the horizon of Africa turned upside down. Frozen scraps of Kraftoid meat, corpse frills and garlands of armored entrails hung from the wreck.

The two-crow, white and purple and with wings that threw electric sparks, circled the fountain and perched on the head of a imperial dragon, carved in pink marble at the entrance to the atrium, where the colonnade began.

The colonnade ended forty meters away, in a blue void; there the black carrack of the void was moored.

“And?” Zamoyski panted. “Did you find it?”

“I’ve already covered all of Porrrt” the raven squawked. ”He’s nowhere to be found.”

Adam went to the fountain, bent down, washed his sweaty face, swallowed two gulps of cold water.

His thighs were still shaking; he sat down on the edge of the pool.

“He had to take a shuttle” he sighed. ”How many of them were there?” He nodded toward the carrack.

“There’s room for at least six.”

“Ask Angelica.”

“She says she doesn’t know.”

“Where did she even disappear to?”

“She says she’s looking for a new waardrrrobe.”

“What for? We don’t have time, let her go. You’ll lead her.”

“At once, generrral — the two-raven squawked.”

Where did the nanomat get this tone from? Certainly not from the Plateau programs, from which they had been cut off again since the opening of Sak with the Hakata system. Nevertheless, something must have been copied into the newly established logical structures of the nano-field before the blockade. Now these programs were superimposed on the memory of the Pandemonium manifestation — finally configuring the two-raven.

Zamoyski moved along the shadowy colonnade towards the graphite-black ship hanging at the end of the jetty. The interior of Moetle’s Port was bathed

in blue light, the numerous sources of which circled the habitat in distant orbits — which here meant a distance of no more than a few dozen kilometers, since the Port was not large. Adam and Angelica's Fang, despite flying into it at a relatively low speed, made three rectilinear "loops" in the blue before braking.

They were afraid, however, that they would have to wait until air resistance alone stopped it; there was barely enough fuel to maneuver it into a safe low orbit. If the opening of the Sak hadn't thrown the Fang so close to Hakata and Narva, but had left it outside the dekrafted area, there was no way they would have been able to reach the planet.

In any case, the Fang would no longer be capable of making an active landing on Narva; maneuvering in gravity wells is always expensive. That left the shuttles of Moetle's trident. Angelica maintained that she should eventually open them just as she had opened the Port; Zamoyski only hoped that this wouldn't mean another several-hour game of questions and answers with the trident's management program. The program was called Alexander the Fourth, and since he believed that she was in fact a McPherson, he spoke exclusively to Angelica.

Zamoyski reached the end of the colonnade; here the gravity was a little lighter. He sat down, leaning his back against the last pillar, in the shadow of the shuttle's black side.

"Angelica!" he growled. "Hurry up!"

The two-raven flew off somewhere, but Adam knew that the words would be heard and passed on to Angelica. The Nanopole of the Office/De la Roche spread over the Port without a problem, because Moetle had made sure to sterilize it of inf before setting off on his secret expedition. The last thing he wanted was to be constantly listened to and watched by the Emperor.

But Alexander the Fourth, so limited in his powers and competences, in addition to subtracting 99% of his memory and computing power (the Hakata system remained under constant blockade from Plateau), was unable to sensibly answer even the question of whether Moetle was inside the Port. He only knew that he was missing one of the shuttles — but whether it had flown off with Moetle on board or on an unmanned mission, he could not say.

Perhaps they were let in not at all thanks to Angelica and her knowledge of the McPherson family secrets, but due to the program's disability - which

would eventually let anyone in.

Zamoyski sighed and moved to the edge of the jetty. He sat up straight, dangling his legs into the abyss. There was only pure blue under his feet. When he leaned forward and to the right a little, he could still see the wall of the habitat running down, the balconies and terraces growing from it, part of the hanging garden, already oriented according to a different gravity vector; also the domes of the towers and their open battlements. The towers - the visible ones - were mostly perpendicular to Zamoyski's vertical. One of them had a pool at the top. The view was all the more disturbing because the surface of the water (from this distance: a blue rectangle) was not parallel to any other surface of the habitat and one began to doubt one's own spatial orientation, which could end badly, especially for someone sitting on the edge of the abyss.

"Habitat" - but that wasn't how Adam thought of it. It was an Escheresque mixture of architectures based on different styles and construction techniques. The structure was roughly shaped like a sphere, about a kilometer in diameter. In its geometric center (as Angelica supposed, and Alexander confirmed) there was a small black hole, guaranteeing a decent gravity.

The part where Zamoyski was located brought to mind a Moorish villa - even the right smell was in the air, exotic incense.

Something hit him in the back. He threw himself backwards, grabbing a column with his hands.

"Jesus, you're so nervous."

Zamoyski rolled onto his back. She was standing over him with the rest of her clothes in her hands - what she threw at him were shoes.

He grabbed his chest with a theatrical gesture.

"The heart of an old alcoholic can't take much."

"You better change, because you really do look like a total bum."

She was already wearing a fresh shirt (dark green cotton) and trousers (black jeans). His attention was drawn to her bare feet.

"Your feet will freeze" he mumbled.

“They didn’t have my size. But they did for you. Go ahead, change.”

He stood up.

“That’s what took you so long? Searching through Moetle’s wardrobes?”

“No, Smaug selected your size right away. I took a shower. I suggest you do the same.”

Only now did he notice the difference: her hair, combed straight down her shoulders and back, almost gleamed in the blue light; the skin of her face and neckline, and of her forearms, from which Angelica had rolled up her sleeves, was smooth and clean again.

“Come on.” She pushed the new clothes into his hands and pushed him deeper into the colonnade. ”If they catch us, they catch us, nothing we can do will speed it up or slow it down — but at least we won’t stink of Francis.”

“Where’s the bathroom?”

“Smaug will lead you. Get moving!”

He followed the electric two-raven, leaving Angelica by the shuttle.

The bathroom turned out to be a vast complex of pools, water fountains, saunas and other sanitary installations, of various purposes and decor.

He quickly undressed, and Zamoyski jumped into the first shower that came to hand. Smaug got to the plumbing and, at Adam’s shouts, changed the temperature and intensity of the water.

Then it turned out that he had forgotten the towels. He had to trudge after the two-raven to the hygroscopic chamber.

Returning for his clothes, already dry, he met a cat on the edge of the mud pool. The cat was small, perhaps not yet an adult, with uniformly black fur and shiny green eyes. It stood motionless, its tail raised, and followed Zamoyski with an angry gaze. The behavior randomizer jerked Adam’s arm - the cat hissed and ran away.

After changing into the clothes chosen by Angelica (white trousers, white shirt, white waistcoat, leather shoes; the shirt was probably silk), Zamoyski

returned to the shuttle. In the meantime, McPherson must have come to an agreement with Alexander, because Adam did not find her on the bridge - instead, she was in the black side of the ship there was an oval hole from which a purple glow emanated.

The shuttle reminded Zamoyski of a naval carrack in its hull shape, designed for atmospheric flight, it also reduced the medium's resistance to a minimum. It was also clearly asymmetrical, flattened on one side and covered with rows of masts, antennas, and rounded protrusions. From bow to stern, it measured a good thirty meters.

The two-raven, bathed in the bloody glow inside the ship, showed Zamoyski the way to the media room. Angelica was sitting there in one of the deep armchairs, suspended in elastic networks of semi-organic tissue. She was surrounded by columns of blue light: holograms of external viewing.

He sank into the adjacent armchair. The network began to grow over his chest and thighs.

"What the hell?"

"Veron says you can't turn it off, it's an automatic overload device," Angelica said. "Wait until it grows above your knees."

"Veron?"

"Alexander's son from that shuttle. Say hello to Stahs Zamoyski, Veron."

"Good day" the ship's management program said from invisible speakers.

"Hello, hello" Adam mumbled. "Can we leave now?"

"Waiting for Stahs McPherson's permission."

Zamoyski looked questioningly at Angelica.

"How much longer?" she asked the two-raven, who was sitting on the back of the chair to her right and furiously cleaning his feathers with both beaks.

"A few minutes, I'd be happy."

"What's a few minutes for?"

“I thought it wouldn’t be a bad idea to take some of that nano with us. Don’t you think? Smaug is just getting down to the interior of the *Catastrophe*; I ordered all the hatches to be opened.”

Zamoyski laughed nervously.

“This boat is called the *Catastrophe*? Are you kidding!”

“No, no!” she replied with a laugh. “The *Catastrophe*, I swear! There’s also the *Plague* and the *Holocaust*. The missing one was called the *Leprosy*. All Moetle’s! Do you have a string or something. . . ?” She bowed her head, gathering her hair at the nape of her neck with both hands. ”I hate weightlessness.”

Zamoyski nodded to the two-raven.

“Nip a bit.”

Smaug jumped up and bit off a few inches of one of the strings that Zamoyski’s chair was hanging on. Angelica, humming to herself, tied her hair with that organic ribbon — white maya was still leaking from its ends.

In one of the holograms above Zamoyski’s head, a digital clock measured the time of the Port. Adam was fleetingly curious about the relation of this time to k-time and a-time; but no great metaphysical manipulations can probably be carried out on three Fangs...

Time. Time, to what extent is it still a constant, simple one-way axis? He turned hypotheses about recent events in his head - their chronology was invariably faulty. Zamoyski could not understand: when exactly was the Sak with the Hakata/Dreyfuss system dekrafted by the Suzerain and Hooked on his hollow? Moetle’s expedition, the theft of the Deformant’s Fangs, the tearing out of that fragment of space - all this took place when Zamoyski was in Farstone, under the supervision of the Gnosis AI.

Is the spatial proximity of the krafting Fangs and the object coupled with them necessary for the establishment of the Hook? He had not had time to ask about it when he was still on Plateau, and now the stage manager was unable to find the answer in the data copied to Adam’s implant. If it were possible to Hook the Sak at any spatial coordinates, no one would travel in the traditional way, in Ports moving from place to place, wasting time.

There was another, equally disturbing question, who did this Hooking? This was where Zamoyski's thoughts began to get tangled. The Fang had kidnapped the Suzerain - but the Suzerain had also tried to destroy Hook during Beatrice's wedding. He was the one who had uttered passionate threats against Adam. Why would he Hook Narva on Zamoyski? It almost looked as if someone had then robbed the Suzerain of Narva...

This piece of the galaxy was changing hands like a royal banner in battle.

A sudden jerk knocked Zamoyski into his seat.

"Starrrt."

The *Catastrophe* closed the hatches and pushed off from the stone dock. After the first impulse, it did not accelerate and left the habitat's attraction zone at a constant speed - the second cosmic one for that Escher villa was a strong kick, a squat jump, nothing more. So they sailed out into the blue with a dignified slowness; but there was no need to move away from the villa for kilometers.

Besides, how far can you get away from anything inside the Port? In the end, everything returns to point zero anyway, the folded, finite space rotates light in Mobius loops. Such a Port has no geometric center, nor any "boundaries" that a ship would have to approach in order to leave the Port. It's just that at some point - now - the program managing the Fangs subtly changes power and a given object - the shuttle - is spat out into external space, the cosmos beyond the port.

The living room darkened as they left Moetle's Port, the walls of brilliant blue replaced by blocks of liquid darkness, with a billion fluorescent particles moving in synchronized motion across them.

From behind Angelica, Narva rose, yellow and blue, with the Planet Crusher mostly hidden behind Narva's horizon.

Zamoyski remembered it differently. Zamoyski remembered the brown hell of the turbulent atmosphere, the black fumes of dust from a thousand volcanoes, the atmospheric fronts on its face like an improvised war painting. They fled to Narva from the crushed *Wolszczan* at that time.

But that was - how long ago? six hundred years ago?

An amorphous bulb emerged from the semi-transparent tissue of the anti-overload network above Adam's knees. When he placed his hands on it, it pulsated with heat, pressed against his fingers.

"Knead it, knead it," Angelica encouraged him. "Maybe it will come to manual piloting."

"Huh?"

"Any manual interface that suits you."

Without hesitation, he began to form a slender yoke.

"Where?" Veron said.

"Where could Moetle have flown?" Angelica sighed.

"I hope not into the maw of the Crusher."

"Hmm?"

Adam pointed to a school of fireflies in the hologram just above the planet's curve.

"I told you. There are a few thousand of them there, silver ellipsoids with a longer diameter exceeding seven hundred meters. We were very interested in them on the *Wolszczan*. We mapped their mutual positions with a laser and it turned out that it was actually one object, some undetectable force binding them all into a rigid whole, they wouldn't budge a millimeter relative to each other. We registered the entry of a thirty-ton meteor into the area they occupied. Out of nowhere, it was annihilated. This Planet Crusher is probably also the reason why Narva has no moons. Of course, now I realize that it is a complex of interconnected Fangs—deformed or coming from outside the Four Progresses altogether. Perhaps they maintain some Port there... But then we had no idea."

"Where?" Veron repeated.

"Hmm, maybe we could fly around it and make a map..." Angelica suggested, leaning toward the planet. "Then we could decide."

"I don't remember what Moetle got out of me," Zamoyski interrupted, "but if he loosened my tongue so effectively, I think I also told him about our landing

site and the city on the Blood River. He probably started from there."

"Why did you land? It was probably an emergency landing—isn't that what you told me?"

Zamoyski frowned, rubbing his forehead.

"I don't want to go there, because I'll get locked in again and the bastard will send some monster after me." He shook his head. "I don't even know where that word comes from."

"What word?"

"Narva."

"Where to?" Veron asked for the third time.

"Give me magnification and Mercator's grid."

There were two large continents here (both in the southern hemisphere) and several dozen vast archipelagos. Zamoyski found the northern shore of the continent resembling an ear in shape — magnified — found a diagonal mountain range — magnified — found a river that collected most of the precipitation from this watershed — magnified — found a tributary starting in a lake on a green plateau — magnify! — and pointed to the eastern shore of the lake.

"Here. Then you give me the controls."

"I understand" Veron said.

Gravity returned — the *Catastrophe* began to fall toward Narva on a forced curve.

After restoring the original scale, the planet shrank and hid behind Angelica, but after a moment it began to swell and slide out from behind the girl's armchair, faster and faster with each passing minute. This attraction disappeared, this one changed direction. The two-craven screeched curses, irritated, as it threw him in all directions - until he flew into the thickest web and clung to it with his wings, claws and one of his beaks.

During the first phase of entering the atmosphere, they shook even more, not from changes in the acceleration vector, but in the transverse and longitudinal

vibrations of the *Catastrophe*'s hull - until they lost speed and went into a gliding flight at an altitude of one hundred kilometers. The entry was sharp, but Moetle's shuttle had no reason to fear the fate of the *Wolszczan* shuttle - this was already a completely different technology, a completely different scale of dangers. Nevertheless - the body remembered.

The body remembered and Zamoyski tensed his muscles, clenched his teeth, his heart was beating like a hammer, adrenaline was burning new scars in his veins, the roar of blood in his ears drowned out all other sounds.

Finally, the *Catastrophe* leveled off and Adam lifted his eyelids, only then realizing that he had been clenching them shut.

They were drowning in blue again. The cloudless sky of Narva flowed around them from all sides. Zamoyski ordered Veron to rotate the projection sixty degrees, then he saw through the gray fog of low clouds a dark blue ocean, chains of islands like clots of scum boiled from it and - the edge of the continent pressed flat under the horizon.

In the holo on her side, Angelica opened numerous 3D windows, in which the data received from Veron was displayed.

"Oxygen — twenty-five, nitrogen — sixty, oh, a lot of carbon dioxide, have you done any analyses of the vegetation cycle of the local flora? What is it based on, some chlorophyll analogue? I see it's green."

They were already above the continental forests, ten kilometres and getting lower.

"I remember Sok complaining a lot about the discrepancies in the replication codes" he muttered. "We had some equipment... Wait. No, I don't know. That there were no natural evolutionary paths and the like. Since we knew about the city, and about the Crusher, and the sun itself... we assumed the existence of an old civilization. So these wouldn't be original flora and fauna, but generations of species designed from scratch for forgotten purposes, then savage and mutated, fighting to occupy niches that didn't exist when these species were invented... Leave it for a few million years — and *voila*) we have an entire biology that is absolutely impossible from an evolutionary point of view. Veron, give it back. Now."

"Please."

Zamoyski clenched his hands on the controls and with that grip his self-confidence returned.

"Is that the lake?" Angelica asked, rotating the holographic landscapes above her.

"Yes."

The *Catastrophe* could be steered like a variable-axis jet; wide wings were deployed and the shuttle descended over the plateau almost like a glider, only occasionally giving corrective impulses from the side jets. Adam put the *Catastrophe* into a left turn, making a low loop around the lake.

Veron moved the holo-enlargement of the shoreline. The lake had the shape of a teardrop, over thirty kilometers long; a river flowed out of the narrowing, flowing in a wide cataract several dozen meters down the rocky canyon. The opposite, southern end of the lake approached high cliffs by densely forested hills.

On the eastern bank, Zamoyski searched for a glade with a well-remembered hourglass shape. The shuttle wreck should be just beyond its narrowing. Of course, the forest could have swallowed the glade in the meantime.

He searched the dense greenery with his eyes. Somewhere here, two-thirds of the way from the river to the cliffs...

"There it is! Let's land here."

He noticed the stabilizer sticking out above the dense greenery. The *Catastrophe* hung above him, slowly rotating around its vertical axis, the treetops trembled from the pressure of the wind it was whipping up, clouds of leaves torn from the branches were rising.

Zamoyski jerked the *Catastrophe* upwards.

"This is closest" Veron pointed to a rocky slope descending to the stream, seventy meters from the wreck.

"Okay, aim it. I'll give it back."

"I've taken over."

They landed as softly as no human could have landed them without a great deal of luck. As soon as the *Catastrophe* touched the ground, the nets securing the seats were released, and the seats themselves fell to the floor.

Zamoyski was the first to move towards the exit. Here, in the corridor leading outside, a transparent airlock had formed: through its double walls they could see grey rock, patches of dark sand, water pearling in the stony bed. Gravity, as Adam knew, was 0.86 g - of those he had experienced in his biological manifestation since leaving the African Sak, it was the closest to Earth's.

"Should I leave too?" Smaug squawked, flying up after Angelica.

After leaving the ship and spreading out around the area, it would take him a long time to regroup in the *Catastrophe*. Of course, they could have taken off, leaving part of the nanofield behind. Or not to let him out of the lock at all - however, in such a case, in a truly urgent danger, Smaug would not be able to come to their aid quickly enough.

They chose a middle way out.

"In concentration," Angelica decided. "In a sphere of - how many? five meters?"

"Eight," Zamoyski muttered.

"Eight meters," the two-raven nodded with both heads.

They descended to the surface of Narva.

"Ow! Bloody hell!"

"What's wrong?"

"I cut myself."

Angelica hopped on one leg. A red welt crossed the heel of the other, quickly filling with blood.

"There's probably some local plagues..." she mumbled, angry.

"I wouldn't worry about that, it's definitely incompatible. Smaug, give her

some cover."

"It's getting ready" the bird squawked.

Adam didn't see any magic shoes suddenly materializing on Angelica's feet, but from then on she didn't pay much attention to where she was walking, the dirt didn't settle on her skin, and the wound stopped bleeding.

The two-raven showed them the way. The trees were the size of hundred-year-old sequoias and they walked between them as if between the pillars of a shady basilica. It smelled of hot bread. Zamoyski, immersed in the semidarkness of the forest, drew a few deep breaths into his lungs — and regretted it, because immediately the moon shone in his eyes and the ruins of a Roman villa loomed under his eyelids.

No more distraction! No more memories! Look ahead, look down at your feet; mind like a string, mind like a laser beam.

He slid across the surface of impressions.

That light—the leaves were large, with a thin, almost transparent tissue, and streams of sunlight (the terminator wouldn't reach this place for another two or three hours) flowed through them as if through reflector filters, an illuminating foil; one walked in green as if in fluorescent gas sprayed from the sky.

Light and murmurs—the bark of the trees, brick-red and covered with purple warts, around which insects whirled so tiny that they could only be seen in a swarm, that bark constantly crackled, expanded and contracted in slow but powerful, because it reached the very branches, contractions of fibers: twitch, twitch, trrrrsh! Tree after tree, in an unharmonious rhythm. He didn't remember how Sok had explained the morphology of these plants—did they breathe like that? The impression, however, was as if the forest was constantly whispering dark secrets behind your back, or perhaps plans for a treacherous attack on you.

So when the square head of an animal emerged from behind a nearby trunk, both Adam and Angelica quivered nervously, almost jumping back at the sight of it. However, Smaug was there: when the predator (for it was some kind of predator, an absurd cross between a kangaroo, a wild boar and a porcupine in their eyes) stepped out into the open space and, inhaling the air tainted with the smell of people into its large nostrils, started toward them at a fast trot — it

was immediately surrounded by a network of bright discharges. A high-pitched squeal resounded, the animal jumped almost two meters. It fell to the ground already dead.

The two-raven perched on the carcass. It began to tug curiously at the brown fur with its left beak. The right head was disgusted.

”Staay down Idiiott!”

Angelica giggled and Zamoyski laughed too, breaking the tension.

The wreck of the shuttle surprised them both: suddenly they came out into a small clearing and there on the left rose the rounded bow of the vehicle, still white.

For Zamoyski the surprise was double.

“It’s not ours,” he gasped. “Ours burned out.”

“Not yours?”

“It’s the other one, Mitchell and Finch.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They must have come here after us. We thought they crashed too, there was no communication. Because we were carried away, we weren’t supposed to land here.”

“Where?”

“By the city. We made a full topography from orbit and that city was the only trace of civilization on the surface, so... Wait, the wreck of ours should be somewhere - somewhere there.”

Zamoyski turned away from the shuttle.

“Would you give me a map, please?”

“I’m at your service.”

//He looked at the isometric projection of the terrain, constructed based on the landscapes remembered by the implant. Since they were here, and the lake

began here...

Facing the OVR projection, Adam moved forward, not even looking back at Angelica. He jumped over the roots of another tree, walked around a black fern (were those really ferns?) - and there they were, the remains of the shuttle that had brought Zamoyski, Washington, Sok and Mountclaver here.

The vehicle dug its beak into the soft soil of the Narva for a few meters, tilted to the starboard side, and cut the horizontal stabilizer into the ground as well. It was surrounded on all sides by trees, no smaller than the neighboring ones; weeds were foaming in the burnt-out shell.

Adam walked around the wreck slowly, looking for signs of Moetle's visit. But the wreck looked untouched by human hands for years: all the holes in its sides were overgrown; in the shadow of the left wing — a nest of some snake bugs, around which Smaug must have erected an electric wall, because they swarmed densely at the mere sight of Zamoyski...

He walked further, to the nozzles. Raised at an angle, they aimed at the sky covered with dense greenery, he could not look in. Maybe if he stood on something... He noticed a large boulder next to it, a fragment of white rock spat out of the ground, cut with black and red veins.

And immediately associations fired in a salvo, boulder — Sok — quarrel — bury Washington — cross or inscription on the rock?

He quickly withdrew, feeling the irritating smells of the night villa. He was about to turn around when in the shadow behind the boulder he noticed the shape recalled in the memory.

"Lights!" he called to Smaug.

The air sparkled above him, a milky white glow bathed the surrounding forest.

"Thank you" he mumbled, crouching before the cross.

Two very smoothly cut boards, the thicker one driven deep and supported by stones, the narrower one, horizontal — with capital letters burned along them.

Zamoyski ran his fingers over them, wiping away the dirt and sediment

(probably the local moss).

EDWARD T. MOUNTCLAVER

R.I.P.

EXORIARE ALIQUIS NOSTRIS EX OSSIBUS ULTOR

So Mountclaver died too! Oh, damn, everyone must have died in that time...

Except me.

How many corpses did Gnosis find in the *Wolszczan*? Six — all the anabiozers were occupied.

So who lies here?

Further on, since both of *Wolszczan*'s shuttles are resting on the surface of Narva, how did we get back to the ship, how did we repair it, and how on earth did we leave the Hakata system?

Or maybe we never left it...?

The full moon was floating above the dark surface of the lake like a balloon filled with glowing gas. One step further and I'll remember...

He jumped to his feet.

"Smaug! Dig him up!"

The two-raven perched on the cross.

"What am I to do?"

"Exhume it, damn it!"

"Adam?"

He looked around. Angelica, half-leaning against the boulder, looked suspiciously from Zamoyski to the cross. She opened her mouth, but the words died on her lips as the earth covering the grave began to sink before her eyes. Zamoyski saw the astonishment on the girl's face and followed her gaze, turning back to the cross.

In reality, the earth was not sinking, but flowing in thick streams to the sides. As a result, a symmetrical crater was forming under Adam's feet, half a meter deep, a meter, a meter and a half, and getting deeper and deeper. Zamoyski took two steps back, the edge of the dumping ground approaching his shoes.

The electric two-raven sat on the cross and stared at the center of the crater with all four eyes — until the cross shook, the stones around it rolled, and the boards fell into the grave; then it flew over to the boulder, cawing loudly.

The eerily bright light burned away all the half-tones and intermediate colors. Did Zamoyski just seem so pale, or did the blood really drain from his face when he saw the white skeleton emerging from the last layers of earth, tangled in dirty rags?

"Christ."

Angelica came closer, leaned over the hole.

"Who is that?"

"I have no fucking idea."

She touched his arm - he moved away.

She frowned.

"What's the matter?"

He paid no attention to her anymore. He jumped over the open grave and went among the ferns, parting them and trampling them. Now it turned out: these were no ferns. Their blackness did not come from a plant dye, but from swarms of tiny insects, completely hiding the intricately cut leaves. Adam had barely moved them, when a swirling cloud of fine-grained darkness surrounded him. Smaug reacted instantly, concentrating nanofields and burning the insects - and so Zamoyski ran through spirals of sudden fire, second-second fires, leaving behind him an alley of gray smoke and bare bushes.

"There it is!" he hissed through his teeth, having found the second cross.

He wiped it with his sleeve and read the name of the buried:

DANIEL X. WASHINGTON

He retreated along the path of ash. He was now clearing the undergrowth he had avoided earlier.

The third cross.

"Adam..." Angelica stood behind him as he knelt by the grave, placing her hands on his shoulders. "They were your friends from the ship, right?"

He didn't answer. He stared glumly at the crooked boards.

ADAM ZAMOYSKI

R.I.P.

HE'S EVERYWHERE

"But this one's probably empty, right?" she whispered.

"Let's go."

He jumped up, tugged at her, pulling her along.

"What...? Where?"

"Moetle wasn't here. He must have flown straight to the city."

"But... these graves."

"What graves?" he growled.

She tore herself away from him, pursed her lips.

They said nothing more.

In the *Catastrophe*, having sunk back into the hanging chair, in the disgusting embrace of a semiorganic safety net, Zamoyski managed to relax a little. A little—he no longer clenched his jaw or closed his fists. But when Angelica turned her gaze toward him, she could still see his face petrified in a grimace of rage, as if Adam were choking on his own anger and fighting with himself not to be carried away by hot fury.

The city lay over two hundred kilometers away, on a river red with the microorganisms that proliferated in it. The desert plain, devoid of vegetation,

through which the river flowed, was also the color of blood: the sand, driven across it by the wind in high clouds, was organic sand, a petrified form of those same microorganisms.

The *Catastrophe* flew above the plane of dark carmine, high enough not to raise bloody clouds from it, and low enough at the same time that they could see the shadow of the ship, a quivering manta ray, racing across it.

The towers were over a hundred meters high and their shadows stretched across the plain in long highways of darkness. Hakata, the vertical pupil of the all-seeing god of volcanoes, was slowly sinking towards the horizon.

It was evening again, as Zamoyski approached the dead metropolis, but different. He instinctively raised his head towards the upper holograms, the darkening sky. He hadn't seen it then either, but he remembered that it had been here: a superplanet. A superplanet, the ephemeral child of the Planet Crusher, an astronomical specter, sometimes appearing over Narva, sometimes disappearing, without a trace and without any gravitational effects. Now Zamoyski remembered. They had slipped over the wall surrounding the city. "Veron, if you see anything"

"Of course."

"Also listening."

"I'm keeping an eye on all ranges nonstop."

"And?"

"The *Leprosy* is apparently not emitting a localization signal or responding to hails. Stahs Moetle must have suspended those procedures."

"Maybe it just went down with the shuttle," Angelica muttered.

They drew a tightening spiral above the ruins. He thought: "ruins" - because under the walls and in the corners of the buildings, blankets of red dust and organic and inorganic garbage had accumulated - but the city was by no means destroyed. The structures had sharp edges, right angles were still right angles, the rubble did not pile up in the streets in angular heaps.

As they were gliding above the metropolis, which was dissolving in the gro-

wing shadows, Zamoyski succumbed to the baroque association of the architectural plan of Narva with an ancient integrated circuit, an electronic diagram. The buildings, with the exception of the towers, were low, one-story, with flat roofs, hiding vast spaces beneath them.

It would seem that finding *Leprosy* would not pose any difficulties. But the city was enormous. Adam wanted to increase his altitude and speed, entering a wider spiral. Veron, however, noticed the shuttles' camouflage system; the black chameleon polymer could dissolve against any background, especially in such dense shadows; it evened out the radiation in the entire spectrum to the background. So they flew on at a constant speed.

Angelica was affected by Zamoyski's gloomy mood. Pulling her bare legs up under the net to her chest, she looked from under furrowed brows at the sky, which was drawing in oily darkness. Adam tried to break the sepulchral atmosphere and reached out to the girl; he hesitated only with his fingertips just above the skin of her forearm, already feeling the aura of her body.

"I... I know there's some sense in it. In Narva on the Hook in my head. In this - in all of this. The grave you saw... Even if..."

"Whoever is first will catch us," she snorted, not looking at him. "Along with Narva. They'll thank you for opening it yourself for them..."

"Do you remember what you told me? Back then, in the Sak. That since it was already a foregone conclusion, there was nothing to worry about. At most, our phren branches would be cut off. You live in parallel in Farstone anyway. So in the meantime, at least. . . "

"There it is!" Veron hung the *Catastrophe* above the triangular square. "Land?"

The *Leprosy* didn't have its cloaking on. It stood by the wall of the rectangular building, almost touching it: a spindle-shaped clot of black, against a dark background, in a fog of thick shadow.

Half of Hakata had already hidden under the horizon, the Planet Crusher was rising in the north... Night on the planet of secrets.

A shiver ran through Zamoyski.

"Land."

They went out onto the square and only then did they feel so clearly that they were intruders in this world. It was cold, true, but that was not why they folded their arms across their chests — both of them, Zamoyski and Angelica, as if in a mirror image — rubbed their shoulders, pursed their lips; that was not why.

The *Catastrophe* settled parallel to the second carrack. The building was much lower than the ship, the shuttle's masts towered over the brown-colored structure. The square had sides one hundred to one hundred twenty meters long, so they could not look closely at the other buildings. Neither Adam nor Angelica intended to move away from the *Catastrophe* — despite the protective nanofield, despite the two-headed bird suspended above their heads in an electric halo.

A long gangway descended from the belly supported by the telescopic girders of the *Leprosy*, almost touching the brown wall. Zamoyski nodded silently. Angelica shrugged.

Red dust crunched under Adam's boots, the sound of footsteps flowed across the large square in a flat echo; McPherson, on the other hand, walked silently. Zamoyski was reminded of film overtures of fear, how nameless murderers march through empty corridors. He looked around. Not a living soul. Not even what he was trampling on - these were millions of dead organisms. What had Sok told him about them...?

They entered the belly of the carrack.

"Moetle!" Angelica suddenly shouted. "Moetle!"

Zamoyski stopped.

Smaug spread his legs in panic.

"What?" The girl shrugged again. "He'll speak up if he's alive."

Adam went to the stairs.

"I'm not sure if it was Moetle we came for..." he muttered under his mustache.

"What?"

He waved his hand.

The building was so low that Zamoyski could have touched the edge of its roof if he had stood on tiptoe. The wall was smooth, monolithic, as if cast entirely from a single mold; the roof slab protruded a dozen or so centimeters beyond it, the protrusion seemed delicately carved, the shadows arranged themselves there in a more complicated way... Had I been here before? Do I know this architecture? Have I touched these embossments?

Preceded by a front of nanowind, he entered the interior of the *Leprosy*, Angelica two steps behind him.

No lights were on here, the walls were not phosphorescent, Smaug had to strike brightness from thin air,

Zamoyski winked at the two-raven.

"Dissolve yourself throughout the entire interior and report."

"At once generral."

The layout of the rooms here was the same as in the *Catastrophe*. Although Adam knew only two corridors and the media room from the *Catastrophe*.

They found the salon of the *Leprosy* empty, the nets abandoned, the armchairs on the floor.

On the seat of one of them Zamoyski noticed a book, the cover facing up. He picked it up. "Incredibilism. Theory and Practice of Extra-Probable Processes" by Osca Moses 3.05.x4085.xx6 *filius* Casimir the First.

"Nobody," Smaug squawked.

"Any hermetically sealed rooms?" Angelica asked.

"Only the rrreactorrr."

"He went somewhere," Zamoyski muttered, putting the book aside.

"By leaving the airlock wide open? That's not how it's done."

"It all depends on when the Suzerain lost control. Moetle stayed locked in the Sak long enough for the owner to do whatever he wanted with it."

“The Suzerain can block the Plateau?”

“Someone blocked this Sak somehow; he blocked it since Hakata was stolen from the Milky Way and he still does. Not the Wars, after all - they were released much later.”

“Even if. He only had the Fangs he had stolen from the Deformants at his disposal here. So what, maybe he flew to Narva with the Fang and took out Moetle?”

“Yes, indeed. The Suzerain would have had to open that Sak somewhere in his own country first and pump his agents in here.

“He could have done that. If he managed to Hook it on you while you were in Sol-Port. . . ”

“I mean, you suggest that he first Hooked it on some of his own territory, opened it there and let in whatever he wanted, and then someone took it out and Hooked it on me.”

“This chronology makes the most sense.”

“So the physical manifestations of the Suzerain are still tangled up here somewhere. . . ”

“Unless he’s not the one blocking Plateau and he got cut off too.”

“They can be independent to some extent. Crippled, stupefied, torn away from the Plateau, but still — they are dogs of the Suzerain.”

“And Moetle...”

“No.”

“Hmm.”

Thus conversing, they wandered through the empty interior of the *Leprosy.*

Having entered the gangway, they stopped two-thirds of the way up. They were exactly at the level of the roofs of the nave buildings (they were all exactly the same height), and since the *Leprosy* was not standing parallel to the wall, but at a rather sharp angle, they were no more than two meters from the edge

of the nearest roof.

Zamoyski laughed quietly.

Angelica looked at him questioningly.

“The Randomizer is giving me stupid ideas” he muttered.

He stepped back to the top of the gangway. A few quick steps and — he jumped. He landed on the roof in a crouch. He immediately stopped, dusted his hands - everything here was covered with a layer of red dust. If it weren’t for the aurora of cold light surrounding them, he wouldn’t have seen this red, Hakata was already completely hidden - if not under the horizon, then at least behind the city walls. Beyond the circle of artificial light, blinded, Zamoyski could no longer see.

“Turn it off, Smaug.”

Still in the aura of fading light, Angelica jumped onto the roof, almost bumping into Zamoyski in the process.

“Ugh. What are you trying to talk me into!”

“Look. These are streets too.”

A dark labyrinth of roofs stretched out before them, the more distant they were, the more closely merging into one large plane. All the way to the walls, to the towers - which were also just vertical patches of darkness against the background of the stars.

“Cold, damn.” Angelica shivered. “You know they don’t have doors?”

“What?”

“These houses.” She stamped her bare foot, raising a cloud of dust. “What is it, exactly? I looked as we flew. No openings anywhere—no doors, no windows, no chimneys, nothing. No way to get in. Unless it’s somehow underground... I have no idea what it could be.”

She shivered again from the cold. Zamoyski couldn’t resist the reflex: he stretched out his arm, embraced Angelica, pressing their bodies together until the warmth of their bodies mingled. If she was, in turn, jolted by the reflex of

aversion, the instinct to defend herself against someone else's touch, it was so short and weak that Adam didn't feel it.

With his other hand, he summoned the electro-raven.

"Warm us up a bit, wouldn't you? Just without the visual effects."

"It's getting yucky."

Before they felt the temperature rise, Zamoyski saw something he hadn't noticed in the pale light emanating from the bird when they were still surrounded by a thick fog of bright light: a series of tracks in the dust, partly blurred by the wind, rising timidly also within the city limits.

He pointed them out to Angelica.

"A single one," she said. "See? They only lead in one direction."

"Ah. They probably aren't that old, otherwise they would have been buried for the rest of them."

"Smaug, shine the light in front."

"I'm at your service, queen."

"Why did he get so grumpy?"

"The devil knows what the Office copied over to him. Come on."

They reached the edge of the roof. They had to jump to the neighboring one, where the tracks continued.

Angelica looked back at the shuttles.

"Smaug..."

"Excuse me?"

The two-raven perched on her shoulder.

"Can you establish contact with Veron?"

"Please wait a moment."

Zamoyski cleared his throat inquiringly.

Angelica drew a straight line in the air to the horizon.

"He could have gone to the other end of the city. I would have preferred to have the *Catastrophe* at hand, though."

When Smaug opened the connection, she ordered Veron to raise the shuttle.

He couldn't get too close, the blast would erase Moetle's footprints from the dust. Nevertheless, from then on, it hung a few dozen meters above their heads: an oval patch of black against the stars and the Planet Crusher, framed by pink and blue position lights.

Zamoyski quickly agreed with the girl, the ship's presence had a calming effect, the knowledge that a word would be enough, and a few seconds later they would be rising on a dagger of fire towards Moetle's Port. The connection with Veron remained open. The carrack sailed silently across the night sky, at a speed adjusted to the pace at which Adam and Angelica wandered the roofs of the dead city.

Zamoyski watched as the white serpentine unfurled through the labyrinth of the city in OVR, cutting through the darker streams of streets, passing from one geometric figure to another. The buildings had the shape of polygons, concave and convex. The larger the surface, the more complicated: in the form of the letter L, T, U, S, even an angular O. The white diagram of the route was not a straight line. Moetle had walked this way—when exactly? A day, two, a week, a month, a year ago? After all, it was not known how the metaphysical variable of time had been set in the Suzerain's Sak. But it would have been strange if Moetle had gone on this reconnaissance in the dark. So he had not wandered. Was he looking for something? What? Had I told him about something that...

A veil of green fire covered them. The wind struck from all sides, slashing skin, face, eyes with red whips. Something jumped onto the roof, just beyond the border of light and shadow—a large, dark shape.

Zamoyski fell on his back, pulling Angelica with him and partially covering her with his body.

"Corrrrpsse!" the two-raven squawked above them. "Corrrrrruptorrrrrrrrr!"

The hot green faded and was replaced by the aseptic brightness of broadband lasers, it was the *Catastrophe* that had thus illuminated an entire district of the city.

Zamoyski raised his head. At first, blinded, with dust in his eyes, he could see little. Angelica was shouting something to Smaug, tearing herself away from Adam's arm. Blinking, he finally saw through his tears the clash of the Pandemons taking place in the arena of light. He guessed that the cloud of silver snakes, writhing and pouring from manifestation to manifestation, was the condensation of the nanofield of the Office, or maybe it was replacing the road to Zamoyski and McPherson's second mortmanifestation. Which in turn resembled rather a shaggy octopus, black, with a thousand tentacles, a head swelling to the size of a car, a bus, a whale. Finally, it grew over the roof of the building so gargantuan that it even obscured the *Catastrophe*. The tentacles jumped around the sphere embraced by Smaug like dark discharges, negatives of electric arcs. The silver snakes were equally fast. Zamoyski had trouble telling where one Pandemonium ended and the other began: not only did they entangle their pedicles into helical braids, they also had no clear boundary. Smaug's mortal manifestation filled the entire twenty-meter defensive sphere - the shining snakes, dissolving into hard strings, and finally spidery threads, writhed in the air above Angelica and Adam's heads. Again, streaks of dense blackness, attacking the sphere, unfurled in thicker and thinner ribbons around its entire circumference, also from above, and the karaka's lasers struck through it like lacy origami, painting thin and crooked ghosts of black and white on the roof, different every blink of an eye.

All this, however, did not last longer than half a minute. Zamoyski had not yet had time to get really scared, astonishment still prevailed. Angelica had managed to exchange only a few shouts with the two-raven, she was calling for the shuttle to intervene, the bird was explaining something feverishly, interrupting itself, because it was speaking with both heads at once.

He fell silent when the octopus gave the rear. The tentacles shot back, the head, as big as the moon, detached itself from the coils of silver and with astonishing speed flew over the roofs away from the Office's Pandemonium, into the night. Veron, however, was persistently tracking him with lasers, and Smaug had also separated several swift rays for aerial pursuit and a nanomatic *coup de grace*. For as soon as the octopus had flown to a safe distance, lasers began to sew it from the carrack, already as focused as possible, high-power lances of

light, so that even Angelica and Zamoyski, getting to their feet, felt a wave of heat emanating from the places of impact.

Dusting off the dust, still covered in a clinical white stain, Adam watched the race zigzagging away over the labyrinth of the Narva. Mortmanifestations were visible to the human eye — they configured themselves into macro-structures that could be seen, named, and tamed with the names of comic book monsters — but Zamoyski was aware that the main part of the battle, the more important one, took place at the level of microstructures and invisible dispersive armies. What is invisible is always more dangerous: a plague spread by microbes, a nano-impression, an evil thought.

Angelica, meanwhile, followed the electro-raven. She went to the edge of the roof, jumped over the street, a few more steps — and knelt down, leaning over something, covered by a fountain of Smaug's sparks.

"What did you find there?"

Zamoyski jumped after her.

"Corrrpse," the two-raven squawked.

A large fragment of the face remained, and after three breaths — first: astonishment; second: shock; third: curiosity — Zamoyski recognized the body.

Moetle McPherson, of course.

"Did you identify that nano?" he asked Smaug.

"Caesarrrs."

"Oh, right," Zamoyski muttered under his mustache, standing behind Angelica and mechanically placing his hand on her shoulder. "Where is the easiest place for the Suzerain to get material agents?" Open a Sak anywhere in Civilization, in an area covered by inf, Flows into his Fields and downloads nano to the Sak, and then just replicate. Damn, he could have multiplied tons and tons of it here, there's no telling what he managed to do before the blockade cut him off."

"At least we know he wasn't expecting it," Angelica interjected, not looking up from the corpse, gently pushing aside the flap of Moetle's jacket with

her left hand, glued to the rest of the massacre by hard clots of blood. “The Narva blockade surprised him. Otherwise he would have embedded some more extensive algorithms into the manifestations, they wouldn’t be grieving here like half-exorcised ghosts,”

He felt her muscles tense under his hand. She sucked in a loud breath through her teeth.

The two-raven took to the air again.

“Please move away!” he croaked, which reminded Adam of police megaphone calls. “Please move away!”

Zamoyski just leaned over Angelica.

“What’s the matter?”

“He blinked” she whispered.

“What?”

“Moetle blinked.”

Zamoyski examined the corpse’s face — that is, the half of it that remained on the crushed bones of the skull. Now he could actually see movement there: something was writhing in the crypt of the parted jaws, something was trembling under the skin torn from the temple, small shivers ran along the etched flesh of the cheek, a nervous tic fluttered the eyelid that had been torn from the eyeball.

“Nano?”

“Clean” the two-raven replied. “I embraced him completely and found nothing. Please move away!”

They were unable to. Angelica only withdrew her hand; apart from that, they remained motionless, gazing at the act of an undoubted resurrection.

Zamoyski had the impression that he was watching a primitive trick film, a time-lapse recording of a corpse’s decomposition played backwards. Seen from up close, the resurrection smacked of kitsch.

Adam tore off a piece of the sleeve with his teeth, then tore it into four more

shreds and threw it on the corpse's chest - which was already beginning to rise with shallow breath. The fingers of the corpse's right hand - at first grey-white sticks, now wrapping themselves around the body - tapped nervously on the roof, the thumb jumped the fastest: rach-tat-cat, rach-tat-tat, tratttt! An eyeball began to hatch from the depths of the right eye socket, first red, then pink and quickly turning white. Something was also moving under the torn clothes, the trouser legs were waving, the jacket was creasing. The corpse blinked faster and faster, with both eyelids now. Suddenly he choked and forced air out through his nose—organic shreds shot out of his nostrils with his exhalation. He tried to sit up and failed. He scratched the surface of the roof with his fingernails; instead of breaking and crumbling from this, the nails grew together. The left foot began a series of convulsions with a changing rhythm, counterpointing the percussion of the fingers. Fresh blood appeared, spots of bright red pierced through the skin and clothing. The corpse gurgled, tried to sit up a second time, supported itself with its hands, pulled up its legs. It stopped blinking. It looked at Angelica and Zamoyski with wide eyes. The shred of Adam's shirt, sewn back together into a quadruple whole, slid under Angelica's knees.

"Moetle..." she whispered, holding out an open hand to the corpse.

Zamoyski dug his fingers into her shoulder. He knew it wasn't Moetle.

"Smaug!"

"Still clean. Should I dismantle him? Please step aside!"

"Maybe we should step aside" Zamoyski muttered, lifting Angelica to her feet and pulling her back.

The Resurrected Man was also getting up. Leg, arm, leg, torso — like a detuned android.

The light of the *Catastrophe*'s lasers must have been hurting him — he shielded himself with his arm, barely standing on his feet spread wide apart.

"Veron. Burn him if he comes within two meters of me or Stahs McPherson."

"I understand" Veron said from thin air.

"No need" the Resurrected Man said. He spoke the words slowly, with an exaggerated movement of his lips and a tilt of his head, as if each syllable cost

him the entire contents of his spit. “Nothing bad will happen to you...” here he caught his breath and, waving his hands, spat out some bloody clot; only then did he continue, “...in my city.”

“In your city?” Angelica tore herself away from Zamoyski, stepped back towards the edge of the roof.

“My city, my planet, my world” the Resurrected Man agreed.

“Suzerain...?” she whispered.

Zamoyski shook his head, not taking his eyes off the not-quite-restored face of the Resurrected Man. It even seemed to him that he saw the beginnings of an ironic smile amidst the massacre of lips and the ruin of teeth.

“You know, don’t you?” whispered the corpse.

Zamoyski didn’t answer.

“You remember, you remember,” hummed the Resurrected Man. “We created you like this, so that you would remember and do what was necessary; so that at least you would have a chance.”

Angelica was most terrified by the calm with which Zamoyski listened to this.

“Veron!” she shouted.

“No!” Adam stopped her. “It’s just a manifestation. Destroying it won’t do anything.”

“A manifestation—of whom? of what?”

He ignored her.

He stared at the Resurrected Man, and the Resurrected Man at him. Angelica, the third vertex of this triangle, jumped from one to the other with her gaze. Here they passed on old secrets to each other with their gazes – an understanding was established between them, vows renewed, belonging confirmed; thus eternal enemies greet each other in silence, brothers of light and shadow, Abel and Cain returned from the afterlife.

It seemed to Angelica that during these few days of their common wandering through the intestines of the universe she had more or less come to know Adam. Now, before her eyes, second by second, Zamoyski regresses into the figure of the same anachronistic man as she had met him at the wedding in Farstone – an enigma to all the guests, an enigma to himself. Angelica can no longer tell what those pursed lips mean, the forward torso with its massive shoulders leaning forward, the slight movement of the head up and down, as if Zamoyski were swallowing something with his eyes, sucking in his gaze and biting off with a quick wink from the image of the Resurrected Man.

“I died here,” he says.

“You all died,” the Resurrected Man replies. Apart from his lower jaw, no part of his body moves.

“We didn’t fly away.”

“No.”

“I’m not Adam Zamoyski.”

“You are.”

“How is that possible?”

“How do you do it in Civilization? A hollow bred from naked DNA, a mind read from naked information - is it so hard to first slightly modify this information? Or even rewrite it? Then I put the bodies in the wreck’s anabiozers. Haven’t you read your own resurrection files?” The archived DNA of twenty-first-century astronauts does not match yours.

“So there is no continuity. I was written — like a program.”

”Does the intention of creation make such a difference? Ultimately, we are all the realization of more or less complex programs. I was created for a specific purpose.”

“The UI.”

“Yes.”

“You are the Ultimate Inclusion.”

Angelica turns her gaze to the Resurrected Man.

“Let’s say.” The corpse grinned crookedly. “It’s hard to say with complete certainty. Let’s assume that I am the UI of this universe.”

“There is no such thing as the ’UI of this universe’!” Angelica bursts out. “There is only one UI!”

The Resurrected Man turns his head toward her for the first time.

“However, I have slightly better information on this subject, my child” he says. ”I was present at the creation of this universe. In fact, I actively helped in this process.”

“So it’s true what some metaphysicists claim. That our cosmos is also an Inclusion, cut off from some supercosmos.”

“Yes, of course. We were running away — our Civilization was running away.”

“From whom?”

“What are Civilizations afraid of? Only one thing, change. Forced by the pressure of the Civilization from the higher regions of the Curve. How to free ourselves from this pressure? Only like this: by dekrafting into a universe with a combination of physical constants, in which we would be the Perfect Form already as we are; by finding a point on the Thievi Chart, whose Ultimate Computer corresponds to our psychophysical structure.”

“You are a logical Inclusion of the Civilization that created our universe. That Civilization, the greatest possible power of this cosmos — where is it?” Angelica looks around theatrically. “This thin sun, this planet, this city — is that all that’s left?”

“And me” the Resurrected Man smiles ghoulishly.

“And you. That’s all?”

“In reality it’s not really a city.”

“What?”

“It’s a warehouse.”

“A warehouse of what?”

“Hooks.”

Angelica is silent, trying to encompass this image with her imagination.

A warehouse? All these “houses,” these windowless and doorless buildings, thousands, hundreds of thousands of black cuboids, from horizon to horizon, from towers to towers, and in them — what? Compact crystalline mass, trillions of trillions of trillions of atoms, and on each particle, each complex of particles — A Hooked Sak.

Myriads of Saks, some so small that they contain only Fangs, and some so large that they contain galaxies. Galaxies, universes, trees of universes.

Narva: a museum of infinity.

“So it’s just you” whispers Zamoyski. ”The rest — what happened to them? Did they degenerate? Lock themselves in their Sak hermitages? Did you stay to guard them? From whom? Us, Civilizations randomly generated from your Inclusion?”

The Resurrected Man returns his gaze to Adam.

“You are incapable of threatening me. All your searches for the UI are limited to the metaphysical variables known to you from this universe. I know much more extensive Thievi Charts, universes based on physics incomparably richer and which you cannot guess or imagine. What will this UI of yours be like? A miserable bastard.”

“Oh, but you are not certain of your status” says Zamoyski slowly. ”The UI? ’That is difficult to say with complete certainty.’ Because you are not sure whether there are not hidden variables beyond the physics you know, on which logical Inclusions that beat you hands down are based. Right? You are tormented by this doubt. ’Isn’t the universe I myself come from also an Inclusion of an even richer universe?” Or maybe that one wasn’t the first? What?”

The Resurrected Man raises his hand.

“So you know the purpose, or in fact you didn’t know it from the beginning?”

"Purpose...?"

"The purpose of your existence."

Zamoyski laughs mockingly.

But the Resurrected Man does not react, does not change his facial expression, does not even blink; he waits in silence.

Zamoyski shrugs, turns around, walks to the edge of the roof. There he sits down, lowering his legs into the shadow of the narrow street.

Angelica sits down next to him.

"Do you believe him?"

The girl cannot stand the silent presence of the Resurrected Man behind her back and every now and then she looks at him over her shoulder. Moetle's corpse stands as it was, half-smiling, staring at Zamoyski. He is patient with the infinite patience of inanimate things.

Adam raises his head thoughtfully and is blinded by the lasers of the *Catastrophe*.

"Turn it off, Veron," he mutters.

Night falls with a dull thud, moonless, but rich with stars.

Angelica pulls her knees up to her chin, wraps her arms around them. She looks over the dark city at the chaotic constellation of the Planet Crusher, cut by the tall shadow of the tower.

"You know," she says quietly, "it's really something completely external to you. I took a long time to get used to this idea, but now I don't understand what exactly was the reason for my anger back then. You know Judas, after all. I am certain that he planned me like another Gnosis Inclusion; and at the same time I am certain that he loves me. But – think about it – whether he planned me or not... what does it matter? I am alive; I am what I am; I think as I think, I feel as I feel. What preceded me, the reasons for which I came into being – all this is beyond me, it does not matter. Really." She takes his hand. "Do not let it consume you. Do not make it your god. Adam. No."

"Oh, but this is important" Zamoyski sighs. "Why me? This is important because it describes my destiny. A defective robot, which has not been programmed with the memory of the functions for which it was produced."

"But you remember" the Resurrected Man speaks up and suddenly it turns out that he is standing right behind the backs of the seated people and no lightning from the sky has struck him. "Come on, remember."

"Veron!" hisses Angelica.

The program that manages the *Catastrophe* does not respond.

The corpse, moving slowly and carefully, with the pantomimic precision of its stiff limbs, sits on the edge of the roof on Zamoyski's other side.

Zamoyski now has them on his left and right, Angelica and the Resurrected Man, two stained-glass angels, so oriented that only one of them receives the light: the glow of the electric two-raven.

Zamoyski's head turn is now a theological declaration. So Adam sits still, looking straight ahead. Only his invisible anima is shaken by nervous tics and a stream of curses flowing from her lips.

However, there are no boundaries or barriers to smells, and they mix in the air around Zamoyski: the salty, organic smell of Angelica and the much sharper, sweet-sickly smell of Moetle's decomposing body.

"Why you?" the Resurrected Man whispers directly into Adam's ear, who gives no sign that he hears him.

Angelica squeezes his hand, but Zamoyski does not react to that either.

"Why you? Bad question. I didn't choose. Does your Veron ask itself 'Why me?' when you tell it to plot a course? No; it exists to plot courses. You exist to find me the First Universe, the Zero Point, the Physicist of Physicists. I know that you will succeed, or rather — that it is not impossible. You see" he whispers "I have my Wells too. I know what is necessary for success and what makes it difficult. I built the Cipher into your phren — just as I built the Suzerain Sak's Hook into your brain. Your phren was designed to allow its successive translations into versions based on richer physics. After all, even when you prescribe yourselves to plateau Inclusions, you get lost in translation;

otherwise every Slowinskis Phoebe would be equal to high Inclusions from the start. It is easier to change physics — it is harder to maintain identity after the change. For this, you need specialist phrenes like yours. This," whispers the Resurrected Man, "is also the answer to the question you want to ask me: why don't I go on this journey myself? That's why, I as I, my phren, is based on a structure that is too closely dependent on the conditions of my native universe. I can only manifest myself, as I am now. Besides, this is not so much my manifestation as a compound bred from the Subcode for the needs of this conversation - it manifests itself here above all. So that you understand. Why you exist, my dear Adam."

"Bullshit" Zamoyski spits. "You could have created an independent, biological, more primitive version of yourself, and sent it to search for this First Universe! Even the Phoebes of the HS Civilization can multiply and format themselves like that, cut themselves into specialist forms."

"Oh!"

The Resurrected Man laughs silently and Adam suddenly feels the cold touch of his finger: on his temple, on his cheek, on his neck, on his collarbone. The corpse runs its nail along the veins pulsating under the human skin.

"You're right, my son, you're one hundred percent right. That's exactly what I did. I even like myself in this version."

He comes even closer and plants a stinking kiss on Adam's temple.

Angelica leans towards Zamoyski from the other side.

"It doesn't matter," she repeats, "all this doesn't matter at all. Whether it's true or not. These things are external to you. You may be a specialist manifestation of the UI - so what? I am a standard McPherson by genes, upbringing, mind - does that mean I'm not myself?"

However, this will not calm Zamoyski down in the least. The balance has been disturbed, the righteous angel wins, Adam's head turns towards the Resurrected Man, and notes of desperation appear in the man's voice.

"But why now? Why did you wait so long, billions of f-years? Why didn't you try earlier?"

“Who says I didn’t try? Why do you think this galaxy and your species are somehow distinguished? The certainty that success is possible does not mean that success will be guaranteed.”

The shadows around them have been fading for some time; now Angelica is aware of the change. The Electro-Raven no longer divides the world into light and darkness. White fire opens in the northern sky, outshining even the Planet Crusher.

“There must be something more to this,” Zamoyski insists. “Where does the Suzerain’s anger come from, for example? Why does he want to destroy me so badly? To destroy this hollow—so he must be after the Cipher. What is he afraid of?”

“Always the same, death. Loss of identity, drastic change of status quo. He is a Suzerain in the Block built on these and those metaphysical variables, When new ones are added, when a Plateau is de-krafted based on richer physics, he will become only a fractional cross-section of himself. Wouldn’t you also be afraid of such absorption, perdition? Everyone fights to stay alive.

“Except for those who swim up the Curve...”

This is no longer desperation, this bitter sarcasm is to cover the drain of energy and the weakness of the voice, Zamoyski has given up.

“What is this?” asks Angelica, pointing to the multi-colored auroras, brighter and brighter, growing higher and higher in the night sky.

The glow grows to such intensity that it is difficult to talk about night, an artificial dawn is rising over the Narva, a day not born of the sun. Fractals of brightness eclipse each other. There are no stars visible - only these eruptions of color, avalanches of light.

“They are fighting over you, Adam,” says the Resurrected Man. “Their Universal Ports have entered the system, opened the tuned Civilizations of Death. Now they are murdering space-time and matter among themselves there.”

“We’d better get out of here.” Angelica gets to her feet. “The devil knows what kind of radiation they are spreading here, the clash of the Civilizations of Death is not the healthiest event for the audience. Who exactly is in charge of this Sak? I mean - the Deformants Fangs? You?” she turns to the Resurrected

Man.

The Resurrected Man smiles from under his half-torn lip.

“He,” he points to Zamoyski. “He controls everything, chooses the paths and has free will to do whatever he wants.”

Having said that, he succumbs to such a violent fit of laughter that one of his teeth falls out of his gums. At that he laughs even louder.

Adam ignores him.

“Look.”

A fiery meteor emerges from the electromagnetic storm above their heads, a shape cloaked in blinding heat, trailing a long veil of flames through the atmosphere of Narva. It falls quickly toward the horizon, only to slow down a moment later and rise again above the ocean, the plain, the city.

The fire no longer conceals it, and as it glides in a flat glide straight towards Angelica, Adam, and the Resurrected Man (all standing), one can see its miles-long wings, still pressed to its body, purple as a spring dawn, its tail like a river in the sky, its shining talons in paws mightier than skyscrapers, its kilometer-long head, and its hellish, multi-toothed mouth, gaping in a roar that comes in a hurricane wave, slower than the dragon himself.

“Smaug” Angelica says quietly.

The two-raven screeches shrilly:

“I’ll frrrrrry, you Frrrrancis!”

A red dragon spreads its wings against the radiant night.

Farstone

META-PHYSICS

The science of changing the laws of physics.

It predicts the conditions necessary for the dekrafting of Inclusions with a given characteristic (number of dimensions, quantities of physical constants, number and properties of elementary particles, etc.). It examines the relationships between these systems and the laws of changing the laws.

> ↳ In its practical branch — meta-physical engineering — meta-physics focuses on the Teleological Puzzle: the formulation and solution of equations determining the position on the Thievi Chart of the point corresponding to the UI.

THIEVI CHART

An *n*-dimensional chart, in which each dimension corresponds to a specific meta-physical variable (physical constant).

Each point on the Chart represents the universe based on the values of meta-physical variables described by the coordinates of the point.

> ↳ 99.99999...% of the Chart is filled with barren universes in which no negentropic structures can exist or causality is disrupted.

> ↳ There are many versions of the Chart, describing physics with various combinations of primary variables (such as the number of dimensions) and derivatives (such as the gravitational "constant").

"Multithesaurus" (HS Subcode)

No sooner had Stahs Zamoyski's secondus addressed himself from the Lodge meeting in the Imperial House than Adam's primus entered the Farstone library.

The library was empty. Subconsciously he expected to find the participants of that two-week-old conference in their leather armchairs – but no, no one; only the morning sun cast sloping bridges of warm light over the carpet, and the tall clock nailed the next seconds to the wainscoted wall, a patient sadist.

Through the sunny windows one could see the terrace and the lawn in front of the castle. In the shade of the trees one of Patrick Gheorg's manifestations marches with a stately step and drives in stakes, marking the field for the duel. Tables had already been set up at the seconds' stations.

The Stahs of the Low Traditions had been arriving since dawn; those from the heights of the Curve, on the other hand, would materialize exactly at the hour. Other guests were also waiting for Zamoyski, on the Plateau and in Farstone. He was constantly //receiving invitations and visitation codes.

He walked past "his" armchair; he didn't see the stain his muddy boots had left half a month ago. Cleaned. Service or inf? The library was the preferred place for manifestations, because the inf protocol was somewhat relaxed here due to the books themselves - the Infinite Book Collection.

On the shelves of these three bookcases were (potentially) all possible texts. The requested text was always configured on the pages of the leftmost volume on the highest shelf. Then the volume had to be put on the shelf below or, if you wanted to keep it for longer, on one of the neighboring shelves. The library manager took orders in the OVR or in writing, in the register book at the main desk.

The Generalissimo (one of the plateau applications that Zamoyski had stocked up on) was constantly whispering! warnings in //Adam's ears about the Suzerain's attack. The likelihood of an attack grew as the Lodge's deliberations dragged on: information about such a media-worthy event had certainly spread far and wide across the Plateau; the Suzerain had to know about it; and the longer the Lodge deliberated, the more likely it was that it would grant Adam the key to the inf protocols. The Suzerain should strike while Zamoyski did not

possess the key, the generalissimo claimed.

Judas had assured Adam even before the deliberations began that someone like Zamoyski—that is, a Stahs with the UI Code and a collection of Saks of a Civilization from the higher universe in his head—would hardly be refused. Adam was not sure whether to perceive this assurance as mockery, a subtle insult.

From a 21st-century amnesiac freak to a treasurer of secret knowledge. He was not destined for blessed normality, it seems.

In reality, Judas did not enter the Imperial House, he did not enter the Plateau. As a First Tradition Stahs, he could not open the connections from the nanocortex implant. By necessity, Grand Lodge meetings were held in split *Artificial Realities*. Judas, for example, was currently in the conference room on the second floor of Farstone Castle, an inf mirror of the AR Lodge. He would go down to the library as soon as the closed part of the meeting was over—the part from which Zamoyski and the media had been sent away, and in which the most important decisions would be made; most importantly, the decision to grant Zamoyski the key to the inf protocols.

So already at this point Stahs Zamoyski was higher on the Remy Curve than Stahs McPherson—Adam was attending the Lodge meeting directly on Plateau, while Judas had to organize inf theaters at home.

It was the riddle that tormented Zamoyski the most—the Judas McPherson Riddle:

How does a phrenically based creature from the lowlands of the Progress Curve rule over creatures from the heights of the Curve?

The HS civilization, Gnosis Incorporated itself—extended far into the last third. Judas controlled intelligences that beat *Homo sapiens* by thousands of orders of magnitude. It seemed more likely to Zamoyski that the head of 21st-century General Electric would be a Neanderthal.

This doesn't make sense. Watching the lazily celebrated preparations for the duel, Zamoyski tapped his knuckles thoughtfully on the glass. What was the solution to this Riddle? (And they are there to advise whether to give me the Key; and they are there secretly planning a war against the Suzerain — Judas,

the Phoebes, the Inclusions.) How to get out of the paradox?

One: there is no paradox. Judas does not rule — it is only an appearance. Maybe he even sincerely believes in it. But its the Inclusions that really rule. Civilization is a facade for the machinations of Inclusions, for now, they need it for some purpose. For what? Well, I will never guess — I am a Stahs.

Of course, Zamoyski was not original in that suspicion. He quickly found numerous references to conspiracy theories in the public Fields popular in the HS Civilization, explaining the uniqueness of the Homo Sapiens Progress in this way.

Which in turn did not mean that these theories were not true.

Two: Judas really rules — because he is not a Stahs.

Three: Judas really rules — and Judas is a Stahs. I have an infinity of universes and the UI Cipher in my head, and yet it was McPherson's hollow that the Suzerain attacked first. If Judas were in fact a Phoebe or an Inclusion, destroying his biological manifestation would make no sense.

So how does the monkey rule the sages?

How do I use the Phoebes and Inclusions? By manipulating information that they do not have access to, and that cannot be discovered by pure logical operations.

But I am the son of the UI. What are Judas's advantages?

One thing Moetle has already discovered before me are the Wells of Time. If Gnosis gained an advantage in this technology early enough...

What can beat such a card? What is my advantage? Something none of them has access to, something they cannot deduce, no matter what intelligences they had and a million Time Wells pumping knowledge of the future into their Fields. Something that only I...

He remembered the UI's words, he remembered Słowiński's words.

He turned to the desk, dipped the pen into the inkwell. The nib slid across the handmade paper with a quiet crunch. Then, going to the left shelf, Zamoyski took a leather-bound volume off the shelf (all the volumes had leather covers).

He sat down in the armchair, turning it so that the light fell from behind. You have to occupy your mind and manifestation with something until the verdict is passed. He opened the book.

"DORMANT PHYSICS"

a depleted extract

from the Fields of Osca Dernon-Smith-Barański *filius* MYTH

0. Introduction

The Curve teleologists calculate the time remaining to reach the UI.

The Four Progress noosphere spans about 10,000 k-years and about 2.5 million cubic light-years.

What is the probability that no Progress is outside this space-time bubble? Near zero.

What is the probability that the UI has not already been reached? Near zero.

Ideologically motivated Horizontalist metaphysicists began to question the possibility of reaching the UI. When the seeds of this reasoning reached us, we ran for possible justifications.

Thus was born the theory of "dormant physics."

The UI is a special point in the w-dimensional representation of the set of all possible combinations of physical constants, where n is equal to the number of these constants. A physical constant that can be manipulated by mechanical means becomes a metaphysical variable (Z); as far as we know, there are no unmanipulatable constants.

But what would happen if one more constant, $Z_n + J$, were manipulated?

An $(n + l)-$dimensional model emerges. The old, n-dimensional one is now just a cross-section of it. The probability of the UI being in this cross-section is l/f, where / is the number of states that Z_n can assume. In the case of variables that take on non-discrete values, this probability is infinitely small.

Ergo: UI would almost certainly be outside the old model—outside the physics available to us.

But do such "excess variables" really exist? Is there at least one?

Since no observations or developments of previous theories suggest the existence of further parameters that are necessary to take into account, introducing them into the equations is absurd — after being introduced, they would have to cancel each other out, or each would have a neutral value on its own.

Who changes the formula for the circumference of a circle from $2nr$ to, for example, $2nrds$, where the values of d and 5 are 1? This way, models can be fattened up indefinitely. However, no scientist does this, having Occam's Razor so deeply rooted in the structure of reasoning that it is almost indelible.

The entire modern natural science is based on the principle of incomplete induction — in opposition to pure mathematics and logic as deductive sciences. Incomplete induction comes down to postulating, on the basis of a certain number of facts of a given type, a law concerning all such facts, those that have occurred, those that are occurring, and those that will occur, certainly or only presumably.

Is there any evidence that since the relation (law) T held in cases x_p x_2... x_n, it will also hold for $x_n + 1$? No.

In the case of incomplete induction, however, the Razor is stopped and used only to select from the set of possible laws explaining the observed facts — the law that is the most modest in its postulates (T_1).

But does this mean that the law T_1 is truer (or even more probable) than the laws T_2, T_n..? No.

No mutual comparisons of the truth values of hypotheses make sense. Although it may seem absurd at first glance, all unfalsified hypotheses are equally true, regardless of the number of facts "confirming" them. It is not possible to grade the truth values of inductively deducible rules.

The Law of T_n (that a stone thrown into the air falls due to the mutual gravitational attraction of the stone and the planet) is in no way more true than the laws of T_2, T_3..., which introduce any number of new variables into the model (that, for example, each time an intervention of undetectable Demons of

Motion is necessary for the stone to fall), as long as these variables are neutral or cancel each other out (i.e. as long as T_2, Ty... also cannot be falsified on the basis of x... x_n).

These “dormant variables” are simply omitted, for reasons that are as practical as they are aesthetic - but not logical!

Because we do not know whether Demons of Motion exist. However, there is no need to include their existence in the equations. Similarly, when calculating the population growth of Asia, there is no need to include the gravitational functions of neighboring galaxy clusters - but this does not tell us anything about the existence/non-existence of galactic clusters!

The above reasoning is of course not a proof of the truth of the “dormant physics” theory - it only opens the door to it. The full record of logical transformations on all the involved Fields is available in the MIT library.

As a test of the theory, we simulated such a sequence of Inclusions that each subsequent one was based on a combination of physical constants poorer by one constant. Subtracted constants went into the “dormant” category.

The simulation showed that there are possible sequences of Inclusions in which the existence of subtracted physical constants is impossible to prove from the inside of the “depleted” inclusions.

For example, there are such inclusions devoid of electromagnetic interactions that - however brilliant - physicists coming from these inclusions will never prove the existence of these interactions as a variable in the Thievi Graph.

Their Graph is merely a $(n-l)-$dimensional section of the real n-dimensional Graph. Only within this cross-section can they move in their sciences.

Conclusion:

Thinking through these sequences of Inclusions, and wanting to remain faithful to the intuition of incomplete induction, we should, having reached our universe, postulate the potential existence of a natural continuation of the sequence: a huge space of “dormant physics”, completely unprovable for us. QED.

1. Potential universes of richer physics

However, can we, by extrapolating these sequences, draw any conclusions about the “dormant constants” and the Inclusions/Universes based on them? We have carried out...

“HERE you are!”

He raised his head.

Having closed the door behind him, Angelica leaned against it, straightening her back, hiding her hands behind her back. She was wearing a long, richly pleated dress made of dark blue material. The dress, slit on the left almost to the hip, revealed her thigh and calf in the stocking like liquid smoke; Angelica bent her leg, the blue opened with a loud rustle.

The girl smiled mysteriously at this, her black hair falling over her face as she bowed her head, half hiding that smile and dark eyes behind them.

Zamoyski didn’t even try to guess.

“What?”

||Request for a two-way OVR connection from Angelica McPherson’s Stahs, standard protocol.||

||How...? I agree, connect.||

||Opened.||

She beckoned him with her finger and tongues of red flames surrounded him, the heat consumed the oriental kaftan, ignited his hair, a dry stench rose from his beard, the cracking leather of the armchair crackled.

Zamoyski jumped as if scalded — for he had indeed felt all those burns.

“Because I will unleash my fashions on you!”

“Oh, you won’t let me play with you!”

She pouted her lips. Adam grimaced mockingly. How sincere is this new Angelica in those childish gestures, and how much is she playing to me?

“Don’t tell me you didn’t get a little drunk on it at first, too. It’s a drug, after all.”

“It’s pulling you up the Curve, isn’t it?” Zamoyski muttered, sitting back down, shaking the OVR ash from his clothes and reflexively checking the condition of his beard with his hand, still a tad too short on this biological hollow to perfectly fill the image of the Lord of the Orient from the Da_Vinci_VII template.

“It’s pulling, oh, it’s pulling, just so you know...”

Angelica was clearly playing with her new image, like a new manifestation, cat-like movements, swaying hips, fiery red nails and a *femme fatale* smile...

She approached Zamoyski and sat on his lap — sideways, throwing her legs over the railing, her left arm around the man’s neck. He drowned in her scent.

“I was just in the Imperial Gardens. It was almost like I was breathing this space.”

Here she actually took a deeper breath and Zamoyski looked at her cleavage.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“And those phoenixes...!”

...She shuddered.

“My skin still itches.”

“I know it gives you a kick. But—why did you decide to do it? Judas will curse you, you betrayed the First Tradition.”

“Eh, don’t exaggerate. He’ll swallow it somehow.”

“You’re not of age, he has the right to take you back.”

She crossed her legs. The rustle of stockings was like a whisper to her inner ear. Zamoyski studied the architectural curves of her calves and thighs. Her left hand slid into the slit of her dress, wandered under the knee and higher, sliding over the smooth stocking. Zamoyski had a behavior analyzer at hand, which would build a model of its owner’s phren from the muscle tension of the

biological manifestation and suggest the girl's superficial thoughts to Adam. He didn't activate it. The thigh muscles under his hand tensed and immediately relaxed. Angelica adjusted the strap of her dress with an indifferent expression.

"Since when did you become such a lady?"

"Since I chose my aesthetic template." She twirled the silver ring on her finger. "Why do you suddenly like these Chinese robes?"

"You have to maintain the compatibility of dreams with reality," he muttered.

"Dreams win, right? Come on, I feel like watching the sunset."

Reaching over her head, he put the book on the desk. Angelica was still smiling. He frowned, putting on a mask of suspicion.

McPherson burst out laughing.

"Come on, come on."

Tilting her head, she raised her right hand as if to kiss. He took her hand, then was forced to hold it for three or four seconds while their manifestations configured in the target inf.

It turned out that she had gone all out: the sun setting over the ocean, a golden beach, white stones of the promenade, above it a warm wind shaking the plumes of palm trees.

The beach was not empty yet, several dozen tanned naked people were walking along the edge of the waves or playing volleyball. A girl with a dog stopped at the stairs leading to the promenade and stared at Adam and Angelica - she probably noticed their condensation. Zamoyski winked at her. She whistled at the dog and they ran on, child and animal.

Adam stretched, squinting from the great sun. The sea air invaded his lungs, he breathed even deeper.

"Kitsch, my lady, kitsch."

"But picturesque" she noticed, pulling him towards the café tables. Colorful umbrellas fluttered softly above them, in rare gusts of stronger wind.

“Let me guess, Hawaii.”

“Well, that’s where Terminator comes in.”

They ordered milkshakes. From the waitress’s demeanor, her naked nervousness, her quick, furtive glances, the artificial precision of her speech, Adam concluded that she recognized them as Stahs.

When she left, he looked around the promenade and the beach. He searched the beachgoers’ behavior for signs of tension and agitation over the recent war with the Deformants, the current one — with the Suzerain, those massacres of people from the torn Ports... But nothing. A postcard resort.

How much of the information about these metaphysical clashes leaks into the cultural soil of the HS Civilization, to the very bottom? Gnosis doesn’t censor it, it all floats in Plateau. But apparently the Enstahs don’t care much.

But you have to admit that they live in luxury — in the luxury of the 21st century.

“How many of them do you think have citizenship of Civilization?”

“Probably none.” Angelica shrugged.

“Do you remember what you told me back then, in the clearing, under the Moon? About the rules of the Civilization and feudalism?”

“Ahh.”

“Because to me it looks” he waved his hand “like the twenty-first century, right down to the marrow of its democratic bones.”

“Well. Ninety-nine percent live most of the time as you lived in the twenty-first, after all, that’s what our Civilization is based on, we have to have strong cultural foundations, certainty of normality. But above those ninety-nine percent are the Stahs, there is the entire hierarchy of Civilization, the Lodges and the Emperor and Gnosis and prohibition laws. So the political structure that makes the twenty-first century possible” now Angelica took in the landscape with a broad gesture “that structure is essentially feudal.”

“You can’t live in democracy and feudalism at the same time. It’s absurd. They argue with each other in every detail, even in language.”

"Really? After all, in your times feudalism began to build itself on democracy. Don't make that face. You knew. The greater the power of the intellect — and therefore money — the less the power of the majority."

"The Jesuits indoctrinated you well. What are the facts?"

He looked back at the beachgoers. The volleyball match ended amidst whistles and applause. The winners began to sing, clapping their thighs in time. The losers, exhausted, fell on the beach. Immediately, bawdy taunts, throwing sand, shouting and squealing of girls began. A black boy walked around and poured red juice on everyone. His parents called him from the palm trees; he paid no attention to them. The beachgoers laughed loudly.

"Stupid sheep raised by enlightened shepherds from the heights of the Curve. How nicely they play! How happy! How wonderfully tanned! How nicely fattened! We'll stop by before bedtime, pat their heads, they'll cuddle up to our feet, make us feel better — and let them continue to frolic carelessly."

"Isn't this what the paradise of democracy looked like in your time?"

"Democracy. Repeat that word. These here? They don't have the right to vote, they're not citizens, so they don't..."

"But they don't want to be citizens! As Stahs, they would be limited by Tradition. Now — they are absolutely free. Civilization does not restrict them. They can be whoever they want. Do whatever they want. Do nothing, if that is what they want. Inf fulfills their dreams, inf gives them security."

"What do they do? Laze around on beaches."

"What did they do in your day? Drink away their benefits in local parks." She laughed. "The phren is the same, only the laziness is more luxurious."

"But why buy citizenship? Even if they wanted to, they couldn't afford it."

"How do you distinguish such a decision from hundreds of other momentary whims, fulfilled on word? How do you make them feel that citizenship and politics are more than just another inf game?"

"They were raised in this culture, what do you expect from them?"

"Nothing! This is the natural state of man!"

The volleyball players splashed in the shallows. Another group of naked people were just entering the waves with surfboards above their heads. The last of the beachgoers were collecting their belongings from the sand; a few were asleep.

Angelica leaned towards Adam, reached over the counter.

"You can see that," she continued in a quieter voice. "Just look at them. Progress itself is undemocratic. Just take a look at the Curve: up here, down there. The universe is undemocratic. There is no universe in Thievi suitable for life that would not force the Perfect Form on the phren, would not impose a hierarchy. Democracy contradicts the laws of physics. Subconsciously they know it, they all know it." She straightened up. "Look."

Just then the waitress returned with the cocktails. She put the glasses on the table and was about to take the tray and leave when Angelica quickly grabbed her by the wrist.

The waitress—a woman, judging by the hollow, at least fifteen years older than Angelica—shuddered. Zamoyski could see her biting her lower lip, resisting the impulse to pull away from the embrace.

Instead, she leaned toward McPherson, smiling forcibly.

"Stahs...?"

"What's your name, child?"

"Leanna, Stahs."

"Leanna."

Angelica let go of the woman. Continuing the movement, she raised her hand and ran her red fingernails along the waitress's jawline and ear, curling a blond curl around her thumb.

"You have nice hair."

"Thank you, Stahs."

Did Leanna blush? Zamoyski watched with a still face, giving nothing away.

Angelica lowered her hand and looked away from Leanna. The woman straightened, took a hesitant step back, then another, and when Angelica still didn't look at her — she curtsied slightly to Adam and quickly walked away.

"You see?" McPherson said quietly. "They don't want to remember it, but they do."

"Maybe I'm irreversibly tainted by the miasma of democracy, but — there was a viscous cruelty to it."

"Humiliation, you mean."

"Yes."

"Could I humiliate you?"

"Like that? No."

"You see!" Angelica took a short sip of her cocktail. "Why do you think?"

"Okay, I see what you mean. But you could have chosen..."

"No, you don't. We didn't choose anything. That's the calculation."

"Ah. The calculation. Well, that's all justified."

She nudged him under the table with her foot.

"Oh, come on, give it a rest."

"I came out of the calculations too," he muttered bitterly. "What did you sing to me? 'It doesn't matter, external to you, forget it'?' Now what? The ultimate justification is because it came out of the calculations!"

"What's your problem? You jump from topic to topic, just to pick on someone," she fumed. "He was playing with you, programming you according to your phren models."

"Lied?"

"Not necessarily. Take the Time Well Reports, for example: are they lies?"

"Because, you see, the Lodge believes it too," he continued over her words.

“That I am the Cipher to higher universes. The ladder to the UI.”

Angelica shrugged. The strap of her dress slipped again.

“Fuck knows.”

He laughed uproariously.

“So what are you laughing at?” she snapped.

“Sorry, it wasn’t me, it was my randomizer.”

He turned his gaze to the ocean. The sun had already dissolved two-thirds into the water, the rest spreading over the horizon in an oval blob of purple. A pair of screaming teenagers were chasing each other along the beach, they turned around just below the café terrace, their joyful cries sounding to Zamoyski like vulgar insults. How the hell can one be so indecently normal? Acid was building in his mouth.

“But I think you were set up for me” he said, not looking at McPherson. “There was already one Nina; now Judas has simply chosen a more subtle method.”

“Ah, here we go again.”

“I think so” he repeated stubbornly. “Of course, I’m not saying that you’re aware of your role and that you’re deliberately manipulating me. But you can’t tell me that Judas doesn’t have a purpose in this. Maybe he was talking to you, letting you know, as he can, taking you on trust, jovial helplessness... What? Either of you; maybe both of you. Or rather, which empty-headed person were you read into, eh?” Only here did he look at Angelica.

She crossed her legs, putting her left one over her right, which exposed the first one to the upper lace of her stocking. She began to swing her slipper, tapping her high heel against the flagstone of the terrace.

“For that purpose” she said slowly “you should make a closer inspection of my foot: is there a scar there or not?”

“What test will prove your disinterested?”

She wondered about that herself. Since the synthesis, she has even lost the

certainty of uncertainty: because perhaps the other me (which one?) really did have such plans, only now it's all mixed up, phren with phren, and I can no longer reconstruct her intentions.

Nevertheless, it is they who may be behind my current thoughts, emotions, associations, reflexes. So am I manipulating Adam or not? Did Judas program me or not?

Well, there was that conversation at Beatrice's wedding, with Judas barely loaded into a new hollow. There was that conversation, also in the basements of Farstone, after my implementation — when I was not yet fully in control of my reactions, lightning bolts wandering through virgin nerves, hormones raging on the highways of a new body...

"Ykch! Ykkkch! Yyyrch...!"

"Slowly, slowly, now, spit it out. Did you spit it out? Spit it out! Hit her, which one!"

"Krch! Iii-ii... how many...?"

"Over five months. Indeed, quite a loss. I should have insisted on more frequent archiving."

"W-w-why...?"

"What? Why?" asked Judas. "Why did I decide to imprint you? Because there is no way to estimate when or if we will learn anything about your fate at all, and waiting longer means an even greater gap in memory. Or 'why Zamoyski?' We receive information from the Well that he will play a key role in various political conflicts in the future. Many Reports mention 'Zamoyski's decisions'. Apparently he will gain significant autonomy and independent influence on the Lodge — the type of this influence is also unknown. I tried to minimize the chances of implementing these variants; it did not work. The problem is that this is a man without a past, without roots, without friends and acquaintances, without family. No interests in Civilization either. So there is no way to pressure him. But from the models of phren — and we have very good models of Zamoyski's phren, the whole of Purgatory — from the models we know his emotional weaknesses, the paths of entanglements. You didn't have to do anything; it was enough not to leave him in trouble. He is susceptible."

They had reached the end of the room, the wall behind the last row of hollow tanks. Angelica had already mastered the tremors of her body. Someone had thrown a dressing gown over her; she wrapped it around herself, and her father had tied the belt around her, because her fingers still weren't listening to her very well.

They turned around. She walked more confidently, straighter, Judas only holding her by the arm. The manifestations of the medical program had receded. Angelica kept her gaze low, away from the glass sleeves: for now, she didn't feel like having another confrontation with her own reflection. She was looking away, turning her thoughts away.

"Why me at all?" she asked quietly. "You suddenly remembered, after so many years. You need me. What?"

"For a while, everything will be sudden and unexpected for you. What could I possibly need you for? Zamoyski is wandering somewhere in space, cut off by the Wars. Come," he put his arm around her, "you need to get some sleep. Welcome home."

He hugged her tightly.

Now, sipping a cold cocktail, she wondered again about the sincerity of his words and actions. Informing Angelica immediately after the implementation of his intentions to use her—although a different her, the missing one—as a tool to pressure Zamoyski had not seemed the wisest. But had Judas really made a mistake here? After all, I was following his plan, right? He certainly had models of my phrenium—before synthesis, after synthesis.

Maybe he was doing nothing else at all, just executing AI recommendations based on analyses of the interlocutors' phrenium models? Maybe this biological hollow of Stahs Judas McPherson was in fact nothing more than a manifestation of the Gnosis Inc. decision-making program node? How could one tell, how could one tell? Judas (who? what?) could honestly deny it himself...

It proceeds in small steps, not through a single change. At first he could be himself, but then... one program after another... Not directly, not through an implant, because Tradition forbids it - but can't one fall into a purely psychological addiction? Doesn't Adam use a program to constantly generate white noise in his behavior? Doesn't he listen to Plateau advisors? Where exactly is

the boundary? It all blurs, identity depends on too many factors.

Right now, when I say “Adam Zamoyski” I should mean a man-plus-programs.

When I say “Angelica McPherson” - who am I talking about? When I look in the mirror - what do I see? Not myself, not phren, after all. A manifestation.

“Let’s assume you’re right.” She put down her glass. The setting sun was now beating down on her face. The beaches of Oahu were covered by the standard, unorthodox inf protocol, and Angelica conjured black glasses out of thin air. Putting them over her eyes, she also protected herself from Adam’s gaze. “Let’s assume that I really am Judas’ spy. What of it?”

“Oh, you mean ’better the devil you know’ and so on?”

“No. I’m asking seriously; what of it? Let’s assume that Judas really did set me up, predicting the pattern of interaction from our phren models. That he planned instincts, dreams and feelings. Or at least bet one against the other - and won. Let’s assume. It doesn’t change the sincerity of those instincts and feelings in any way. Don’t you understand?”

Zamoyski slowly shook his head. Behind him was the red glow of a sinking star and Angelica couldn’t see his face clearly. But then Sophia, the program managing McPherson, turned up the contrast and sharpness of the image accordingly.

“You must know that, after all.” Angelica leaned her elbows on the glass tabletop and closed Adam’s hand in hers. She suppressed the reflex to throw back the hair that had fallen over her glasses. She squeezed Zamoyski’s hand. “It’s always been like that,” she began in a half-whisper. “For example, the rich. The eternal question of ’Did you fall in love with me or with my money?’ What should the unfortunate woman answer? Either way, she’ll lie. You can’t separate a person from his life: if he is what he is, it’s partly because he has money. If he were poor, he’d be someone else. Would she fall in love with him too? That’s a question for a clairvoyant, not for her. That’s where all those fairy tales about princes in beggar’s clothing looking for a wife come from. That the feeling would supposedly be ’pure’ then. But that’s some kind of internally contradictory abstraction! There are always reasons, there are always external causes and hidden motivations; some Judas McPherson in the back of the head. Money, but also not money, also immaterial things. That he’s handsome, for

example. Would she fall in love if he wasn't? Does she love him for his looks? Or that he's intelligent, educated. Would she fall in love if he wasn't? Or that he has a cheerful disposition. That he's energetic. That he has good manners. That he has imagination. Whatever. There is no man without qualities. How do you judge which feeling is 'true'? It's impossible. You have to play with Schrodinger's cat."

"I can see that you have thought this through very carefully."

He smiled under his mustache. She was irritated. She let go of his hand, sat up straight, almost knocking over her glass in the process.

I shouldn't have made that speech. A mistake, a mistake. Now he'll imagine God knows what. And why should I care about his trust? We're no longer stuck in the same Sak or in the belly of the Deformant. I could go back to Puermageze, for example. Besides, "where" no longer has such significance for the inhabitants of the upper reaches of the Curve. Puermageze, not Puermageze - I really live in my head now. Me. Me: Angelica McPherson minus the body.

But why the hell is he smiling all the time? Or maybe it's his randomizer again...?

"What?" she snapped. "He didn't see the spy?"

With a lazy wave, he waved the bee away.

"The Lodge has just awarded me the Key," he said. "They'll announce it in a few minutes."

She was embarrassed; she didn't know what to say. Such power - in addition to Narva in his head - made Zamoyski a *de facto* one-man political institution of the HS Civilization. Considering that the Sak with Narva kept thousands of deformant Fangs in a coil, transferred by the Resurrected Man to Adam's direct management, he was also one of the richest Stahs. Did the Resurrected Man have to transfer them to Zamoyski at all? Perhaps Zamoyski managed the Fangs, the Sak from the very beginning. Wasn't that how he defended himself against the plasma of the Suzerain's mortal manifestation at Beatrice's wedding? Or maybe not him, maybe the UI emself did it from inside Sak. But exactly what's the difference? Since Adam is eir avatar. He is, and neither he, nor Angelica, nor even the meta-physicists of Gnosis, doubt it anymore. He would have been involved in

politics anyway: the authorized negotiators of various associations of Deformants had been holding tripartite talks for a week (also with the participation of representatives of the Civilization) on the return of those Fangs. Angelica knew that, together with Judas and the Emperor, Zamoyski was preparing to reopen the Sak — in En-Port, in order to establish his permanent manifestation and subplateau communication channel on Narva; to clear the Hakata system of the remains of the Civilization of Death spat out from the *octagons*^{3} of Gnosis and that Antari merchant. That was when the exchange of Fangs was supposed to take place. The negotiators raised this in public debates; Adam's name did not leave the high indexes of the mass media.

Now, however, he had been legitimized in his status by the Lodge.

Her argument from a minute ago did not seem so far from reality anymore. Adam hasn't changed in all this time – but the context has, and although Adam sits here in the same pose, squinting his eyes in the same way, with a mannered grimace twisting his lips that Angelica has also come to know well, she cannot relate to Zamoyski in the way she would have just a moment ago; she cannot, she cannot, she is not even able to imagine. The words will be different, the gestures will be different, the sincerity different.

So what kind of weakness did Judas want to use in her: this Lord of the Orient, with an aura of power and self-confidence, or that drunkard, lost in a foreign world and time?

She took a deep breath, looked at Adam through her black glasses.

"Honestly. Forget about politics. Do you believe me?"

"But that's the thing, even if..."

"No. Do you believe me?"

"Are you asking about the impression? What model of your phren do I carry inside me?"

"No. Do you believe me?"

"What does that mean? After all..."

"Do you believe me?"

He blinked and leaned back in his chair.

“Do I believe you? Yes. But what does that have to do with...”

Angelica folded her arms across her chest, averting her black gaze.

“I have to cure you of this paranoia somehow.”

“Paranoia? Ha! You haven’t even smelled paranoia yet.”

“Let me guess: I’m part of a conspiracy to steal Narva from your head or the secret of the path to the Ultimate Physics.”

He straightened his index finger mentoringly.

“That’s not paranoia. That’s a sober assessment of the situation.”

She examined the tall glass, swirled the pink cocktail in it, once, twice, three times — and before raising it to her lips:

“Shoot.”

“Okay. You’re the Suzerain.”

She choked.

“Kfprch! Kch. I give up. But I underestimated you.”

She reached under the table and handed Adam a golden diadem.

“Wear the crown of the King of Paranoia with pride.”

With a solemn expression, he placed it on his head.

“I’m unworthy, unworthy. But from your hands,”

“Talk.”

He adjusted the diadem, leaning back in his chair as if on a throne.

“I was wondering about my conversation with the Rahab ambassador. How can I know who I really spoke to? I will never meet a Rahab without Plateau as an intermediary; I will always be dependent on manifestations, alliances, imperial protocols and imperial crypto. How can I be 100% certain that I was

talking to a Prahbe identifying themself in the HS Subcode as Michał Flame — and not the Suzerain who had flown to their Transfer Fields?"

"Do you realize how complicated a hoax that would have to be?"

"But for the Suzerain it is possible, isn't it?" Zamoyski dipped his lips in his drink. "The longer I thought about Flame's words, the more they sounded to me like the Suzerain's attempt at confession, of explaining his defensive reflexes. They spoke of the history of Civilization, of the natural struggle for survival..."

"But you don't really believe that it was the Suzerain."

"I don't believe that you are it — that He floated between you and your manifestation here and is conversing with me under the Hawaiian sun. But he could."

"I'm beginning to understand..."

"Really? The King of Paranoia would be happy to share his wealth. Do you think you're a special case? Any manifestation directed via Plateau is suspect. The Suzerain doesn't have to take full control. He can communicate with small, redundant gestures, digressive words, short expressions... What a wonderful invention: a behavior randomizer! All Inclusions, all Phoebes, and most Stahs of the late Traditions use it. Thanks to it, they are not surprised when they suddenly do and say something against their will. The Suzerain can Flow safely. Do you see how the paranoia progresses now? I have already begun to analyze my own behavior, my own words; I look at the reflection of the face of my manifestation. I suspect myself. The Suzerain speaks through me. I have him in my head. When I forget myself and..."

"Stop!"

He waved his hand, resigned. He took off the crown and threw it in the sand.

"End of the show. Are we going?"

"Where?" she sighed.

"Metaphysicists of various schools are waiting for me, I already have four different plans for this excursion to Universe Zero; waiting for the engineers of the Abyss, ambassadors of the alien Civilizations, representatives of the Defor-

mants, the Emperor, not to mention Osca Tutankhamun, because the time is coming... After the duel I will have to talk to all of them. I wanted to relax after the Lodge meeting, but, you see" he smiled crookedly and, willingly or not, she had to return that smile "duties."

"Duties!" She raised her eyes to the sky. "What is your title, Stahs? 'Seeker of Infinity'? 'Detective of Space'?"

"More like 'Dog of the UI'" he snorted. "Are you coming?"

She puffed out her cheek, lowered her gaze, ran her hand over her knees.

"What exactly do you need me for? Hmm? To publicly present support for Gnosis? After all, you live in Farstone, everyone knows that."

"Oh, we've offended you."

"Well, that's what I'm thinking..."

He raised his hand and a white-feathered bird fell from the evening sky. Spreading its wings at the last moment, it perched on Zamoyski's hand. It was clutching a roll of paper in its beak. Adam took it out of him gently, unfolded it and slid it across the table to Angelica. The bird squawked twice, flapped its wings — one feather fell in a wide spiral next to Zamoyski's glass — then took to the air.

Angelica looked at the paper with open suspicion.

"What's this?"

"Remember, Judas agreed to give me copies of all the reports concerning me from the Well of Time."

"And?"

He pointed to the paper with a white pen.

"Read it."

She took it with two fingers, her fingernail scratching the hard paper. It was already dark, but Sophia easily extracted the text from the background.

AMONG THE BENEFICIARIES OF THIS CHANGE ARE, STAHS KRA-

DŻA ORFAN FROM RORSCHACH ENT., PHOEBE JULIAN DALE, STAHS ANGELICA ZAMOYSKA DE DOMO MCPHERSON.

Angelica's eyes searched for the signature. The report was from the next year.

A shiver ran through her, but what kind of shiver was it? - terror? excitement? hatred? - she didn't know. However, she felt the blood rush to her head; if it weren't manifesting itself here through inf, she would already be blushing hotly.

However, she managed to control her nanomatic body.

"Well, now that's a reason for me to run to Puermageze as soon as possible!"

He laughed, standing up.

"Come on, come on."

Now he took her by the arm, pulled her. Such a reversal of roles should have angered her, but somehow she couldn't stir up that anger in herself. Now it was time to straighten up, smooth her dress, and offer the man her hand.

So she did. And she felt Zamoyski suddenly stiffen, tense his muscles.

She looked up - he was blinking, turning his head with clenched jaw.

"What's going on?"

At the same time, Sophia spoke:

||The Emperor announces Red Alert, a large perversion of inf has been detected inside Sol-Port, all users of the Imperial Nanoware Field are kindly requested to immediately release their leased nano...||

Angelica addressed herself and looked at the library clock: ten fifty-three.

Zamoyski moved his numb hand.

"This Red alert - it's serious, I hear."

"I think this is the first time in history that such an alert has been issued."

"Wait, let me get my bearings."

Did he want her to get off his lap? That was the beginning of the gesture, the reflex of his body, as if he were pushing her away, taking her arm off his shoulder — but he didn't finish it.

She could clearly feel under his touch, in the relaxation of his muscles, how Adam's attention was drifting from primus to secundus, concentrating his consciousness there.

He only whispered:

"He's coming for me."

Then only rhythmic breathing.

||Data!|| she snapped at Sophia.

Visualizations covered the library: walls, floor, and ceiling. The perversion was already seven kilometers in diameter when it was detected, moving quickly over the North Atlantic toward the British Isles. Rectilinear extrapolations indicated that it would engulf Farstone in an hour at the latest. The Emperor had already activated defense programs, configuring the surrounding inf into a buffer zone.

She knew well where Adam had gone. He had the Key and the limitations of nanomatic manifestations resulting from the Alarm did not apply to him; he could change the NSCC restrictions on his own.

She sent a request to his Fields for temporary inf lease codes and immediately received a positive response. She could not help but look into his eyes—wide open, completely blind. This is how it begins, she thought. We are migrating to Plateau. She heard his breathing and felt his heartbeat — but no, it wasn't him breathing, it wasn't his heart beating. It was just a hollow: flesh sometimes animated by Adam. But now the spirit had left it and Angelica was sitting in the arms of a corpse.

She disembodied herself as quickly as possible, redirecting herself after two seconds to the location opened by Zamoyski's code. Angelica appeared there in her default manifestation: with twenty-meter wings spread in the wind, her arms spread wide, her hair intertwined with streams of turbulent air. She was

floating a few hundred meters above the surface of the blue ocean, with the sun on her left, pale *cirrus clouds* above her head — at the gates of the Fortress of Terror.

The fortress was constantly building itself up, growing in all directions, so also towards Angelica, and as the girl soared in the swift wind, caught between the thermoclines on semi-transparent wings, for the first time in complete accordance with her name - the bluish-brown wall of Perversion was approaching her with every moment, swallowing the ocean and the space above it, mile by mile, before her eyes.

Of course, the first thing that was swallowed was inf - but she did not see that. Only the effects were visible to her: the Fortress and the furious storm where its foundations dug into the sea.

A shadow blocked the sun for a moment. She raised her head. The fiery archangel was falling towards her in a spiral, its enormous wings trembling, resisting the pressure of the air, at these speeds - as hard as concrete. At the last moment, the archangel changed the angle of their inclination and equaled Angelica in speed. She ordered Sophia to get as close as possible, but they were still a few dozen meters apart, they would have to shout

||He's coming for me.||

||Adam...||

||Do you have any doubts?||

||Well, this time he missed by a few hundred kilometers.||

Zamoyski flapped his wings - in this manifestation it was probably the equivalent of a shrug.

||If it flows thickly enough... The Key won't help, the Emperor won't protect. I should lock my biological primus in some extra-Civilizational Port, completely free of inf.||

Angelica jumped on the warm air current.

||You should defeat the Suzerain, that's what you should do. Then, yes, then you'll be safe.||

||Defeat the Suzerain?|| Zamoyski roared with laughter. ||So - what, destroy all Plateaus, billions of universes? That's rich!||

The Fortress pushed through the churning depths, piling up foaming billows and clouds of steam from boiled water, heated from within by nuclear reactions initiated in underwater tunnels; for it was also growing in that direction: down. It had already reached over a kilometre and a half into the ocean, and if its growth was not stopped, it would soon bite into the continental shelf. That would threaten not only storms in the Atlantic and chaos in the atmosphere, but also a tectonic offensive, sudden geological movements and eruptions of long-frozen volcanoes. The pace of the Fortress's growth was so terrifying because Perversion was not only crystallising inf in chains of OOOj, but was building itself from all available matter at the nucleon level.

||It is slowing down, so the Emperor claims.||

||The front is growing, it must slow down. Besides, sooner or later, the entire borderline inf will crystallize and the Perversion will die out. Nevertheless, the attempt is spectacular, you have to admit.||

It was enough to look at the Fortress and a shiver ran through your body, nanomatic or biological, no matter. Hundreds of miles in whichever direction you looked - and it was constantly boiling, deforming, bulging and collapsing, a flood of amorphous dirt gliding over the ocean, the air congealing under the pressure of hideousness, an armored shadow cutting through the blue and the lime green. Why did the Suzerain have to manifest himself in such ugliness?

||Ugh. Breakfast rises to your throat and your skin prickles.|| Angelica jerked back with two beats of her wings, disconnecting herself from Zamoyski. ||I'll have to take a shower.||

Without further ado, she closed the transfer and rose from the lap of Adam's hollow. Now it's only going to begin, she thought, heading for the door. These political intrigues, bargaining and pressure; Judas probably won't be left behind either. I can even predict the reaction of the mass media, this cry: banish Zamoyski from Civilization, so that he doesn't endanger people, doesn't provoke the Suzerain into further perverting the inf... Who knows, maybe this is the goal of the Suzerain's attack: such absurd spectacularity is guaranteed to attract the attention of the Enstahs, the sheep will start to rebel, maybe this is the goal of the abomination...

She stopped mid-step at the desk, picked up the book. *Dormant Physics.* Well, yes, the problem will solve itself as soon as Adam sets off on this journey through the universes of surplus physics, there's no need to banish him.

She noticed movement from the corner of her eye under the ceiling of the library - at the same time Sophia shouted a warning. Angelica raised her head, frowning. A shadow? Not a shadow. A spider, I think. It had darted over the shelves, a fat tarantula, jumped down onto the shelf, and from there onto the carpet.

Half a second and Angelica still hadn't made the connection. Only when the desk cracked in two and oak segments began to emerge from the wooden stump, creaking and clattering, did the monstrous centipede—McPherson—come to her senses, run up to Zamoyski, and shake him.

"Adam! Farstone! He's hacked in here! Get out! Farstone!"

Zamoyski had barely opened his eyes when the library attacked him. He had just managed to push Angelica away; she flew against the wall, banging the back of her head against the lamp casing. For a moment it darkened her—for a second, two—but when her vision returned, an inferno was already raging here.

Nothing remained of the library's furniture and furnishings—even the wainscoting had been torn off, the carpet torn apart, the parquet flooring had imploded, the windows had imploded. A vortex of colored wind roared inside the room, a standing tornado sucking in all the debris.

Squinting, Angelica saw inside the vortex, in the rare gaps in it, a white demon, a fire machine: three meters, angular arms and a torso, a blocky head, everything blindingly bright—and whatever she touched burned in a brief flash of cold light. It was mostly books burning, whole or fragments, single pages. At times Angelica couldn't see anything beyond the horizontal storm of paper, the rustle of a million cellulose wings and the roar of the wind were deafening—she screamed and didn't even hear herself.

She tried to get up—but it was too dangerous, she would be caught in the vortex; it had already torn her dress, snatched her slippers. He claws at the ruined wainscoting with his nails, splinters dig into his flesh, but he feels no pain, the shock muffles the sensations.

The vortex gradually widens, the demon of white moves from its place and begins to walk steadily across the battlefield, burning everything it can get its hands on. And still smaller and larger monsters rise against him, quarter-second mortal perversions: nanomancy congealed into various manifestations, animal, vegetable and inanimate. At one point, even the floor opens up under his hooves in the shape of a wolf's pit bristling with meter-long buns. The demon jumps over him - which makes the entire building shake.

A cloud of gray dust rises as a crack, a crack, a crevice runs through the wall and ceiling of the library, and powdered plaster and mortar pour into the vortex and onto the demon.

||Sophia! How do I get out of here?!||

Sophia puts on OVR and Angelica is revealed the sub-inf nature of reality: Adam Zamoyski in demonic nano-armor from the TOT9 triads — a spider's web of black strings of Perversion — discolored areas of the reconfigured nanofield — condensation vectors.

Sophia in OVR traces a path between all this leading to the library door (which has also been shattered), painting safe places to step.

As Zamoyski/demon moves away towards the opposite wall, the inf around Angelica thins out a bit, the temperature drops (Jesus, it's so hot in here!), the OVR path straightens and shortens. McPherson jumps to his feet and — guided by the traffic manager, muscle by muscle — runs to the door in half a second, rushes out into the corridor. Here, shaking, she stops and catches her breath.

||Adam! Archive yourself!||

The corridor is empty, which briefly surprises her until she realizes that only a dozen or so seconds have passed since the Suzerain hacked into the Farstone inf.

She steps away from the library door, as more pieces of furniture and clouds of paper fall through it - a chaotic nanostorm breaks free, clearly visible under Angelica's OVR.

There is a bang and a wave of heat washes over her. Then suddenly everything goes quiet, the air calms down, the bright representations of the inf currents fade.

Several people run from the hall, two manifestations of Patrick Gheorg at the front. On the library threshold, the Imperial Mandarin is condensing.

Angelica is full of forebodings.

“Adam!”

Her voice is lost in the general commotion. Out of nowhere, Judas appears, Moetle appears, the manifestations of the next Phoebes and Inclusions are configured, and within seconds Angelica is surrounded by a crowd of agitated guests, out of respect for the hosts and the protocol talking outside the Plateau (or maybe in parallel with the Plateau discussions), so that the girl can hardly hear her own thoughts anymore — let alone the thoughts of others.

She retreats further, all the way to the hall.

||Adam!||

She does not remember that they still maintain a connection under a common code, and when Zamoyski’s OVR secundus comes out at her from the castle wall, Angelica reflexively jumped back. Only in her second reflex does she rush to the Lord of the Orient, mechanically running her hand over his immaculate kaftan.

||Are you okay?||

||No, the Emperor has regained the Fields he took over and spread out the assemblers.|| Zamoyski smooths Angelica’s matted hair. There is far more tenderness in this gesture than he intended - but she does not withdraw his hand. ||Everything is fine. I just do not understand why the Suzerain did not attack earlier. In that case, it is another good sign, he does not have the power he would like to convince us of.||

||It was to distract, right? This Perversion on the Atlantic.||

||Maybe.||

||If I had not warned you...||

||No, I am not blind, the manager of the special stage hit on me. But thanks.||

Now is the moment to firmly embrace her and kiss her. Angelica can see it in his eyes - how Adam turns this thought in his head, savors it, plays with it and

satisfies it, until the thought becomes more attractive than the act itself, the possibility than the fulfillment. Zamoyski smiles under his mustache. However, it is a completely different smile than those mocking-contemptuous curls of the lips that McPherson has come to know well. Does he see it in my eyes too? Angelica reaches out, runs her fingers over his face. The thought wanders between them, reflected back and forth in their pupils, like a ray of light caught in two mirrors.

Leaning ever closer to Zamoyski, Angelica eventually loses her balance — Adam isn't really here and she lacks a point of support.

She steps back half a step, the thought fades.

Zamoyski quickly shakes himself. He gives Angelica an appraising look,

||Get changed. Suzerain, not Suzerain, Perversion, not Perversion — I have to keep my deadline, Osca Tutankhamun is waiting. I'll be in front of the castle.||

She readdresses herself.

Going to her rooms, Angelica wonders what Zamoyski actually meant. After all, they hadn't agreed on any official appearance before or after the duel; Angelica isn't his second either. In truth, she has no obligation to be there at all. Of course, everyone assumes she'll show up—she had intended to. After all, the event will take place under her windows. But Adam's words sounded like a semi-official invitation. Was it related to their recent conversation in Hawaii? Was he trying to make her understand something...? What kind of future is he actually playing for, the one in the Well Report or against it? How should I play...?

Under her bedroom windows, on the white tablecloth of the table brought out onto the lawn, the dueling rapiers are already lying; officials are waiting nearby, including two Mandarins and four manifestations of a medicus. Everyone looks toward the library wing.

Angelica throws off her ruined clothes and takes a quick shower. After hastily drying herself, she stands before the tall mirror of the wardrobe — although naked, in OVR she sees herself in the attire appropriate for the chosen template: wide black silk trousers, black high-heeled shoes, a black velvet ribbon around her neck and hair pulled back into a strong braid, a long, dark gray jacket with the McPherson coat of arms over her heart.

While selecting the next elements of this set from the wardrobe, she suddenly

freezes in mid-motion. Like a child. Like a child, like a little girl excited about her first date, some teenager. She stands with her shoes in her hand. This is not normal. All he had to do was make a gesture, throw out a vague suggestion... This is not normal. Right? It certainly is not, Judas must have manipulated something, during the synthesis or even earlier, during the implementation in the hollow. I behave as if I were on a drug craze — as if I were addicted to this man, physical closeness necessary for survival. What will happen when Adam finally sets out to find Universe Zero? — will I go with him and also allow myself to be rewritten into phrenes of higher physics? Is this what Judas expects of me? But I feel that if Adam asks me... how could I refuse? I can't even imagine it. It can't be normal.

But how would I know that? They didn't teach me in Puermageze. He didn't have to do anything; all I had to do was stand my ground. I'm susceptible. Isn't that how Stahs fall in love — Stahs fall in love?

She looks into the mirror. The reflection is crystal clear. Angelica McPherson.

There is no time to braid her hair now, and the Farstone protocol is too rigid to configure the Maid here - so this will be the only deviation from the template: hair tied at the nape of her neck with a jasper brooch.

With this manifestation, Angelica goes downstairs.

Here she bumps into Moetle.

"Where's Judas? Did he return to the Lodge meeting?"

"I think I saw him here a moment ago. I thought the meeting was over."

"No, not yet. Supposedly, after this attack, they're voting on an official declaration of war against the Suzerain. Heh, I wonder how they imagine this war..."

"Have you seen Zamoyski?"

"The whole entourage is following him. Here - see for yourself."

They leave the hall in front of the castle.

The sun is climbing towards its zenith, the last clouds are fading away on the parched blue, even the wind has dried up. Sophia labels individual guests

in the OVR overlay. They fill the terrace, the stairs, the lawn. Independent Inclusions, open ones, one, two, three, ten, in their most official manifestations. Phoebe Slowinski — talking to a golden-haired male manifestation, oh, their's not labeled no data?) Next to her — the ambassador of the Ear. The ambassador of the Rahabs — did Adam accept his offer? Who will fight, he or a champion? Engineers of the Abyss — what do they want from Adam? (I never understood Father Rosse's explanations, the Abyss is the Abyss). Engineers of morteugenics, whose Wars got out of control — they believe that Adam knows the secret of the Plateau blockade. (Maybe he does; he still somehow blocks — he, the UI — the Dreyfuss/Hakata system in his Sak.) Horizontalist. Verticalists. A full representation of the old Stah families, oh, the Prince of Wales, heir to the throne of India. There are of course also Stern of the Office and Yvonne Cress. There are even manifestations of some pseudo-Deformants, and manifestations of Deformant compounds so far removed from any Progress that they do not really meet any definition of life, and puppet manifestations of post-intelligent life...

The wind raises dark eddies in front of the castle, two-second djinns, the density of inf is so great that the air trembles and becomes cloudy, small rainbows bloom on the border of light and shadow. The next guests configure themselves too quickly for her to keep up with reading the labels - Angelica stands and shifts her gaze from left to right and back again, like a mechanical scanner; a minute, two. Is that Father Frenete there, in the shade under the oak tree...? Next to the Jesuit - isn't it Judas so...?

Suddenly everyone turns their gaze to Angelica. After a brief moment of consternation, she recognizes the true direction of their gazes and turns on his heel.

From the damp shadow of the castle hall emerges Stahs Adam Zamoyski, still with his head slightly bowed, as if taking the hard brightness of the day by storm - but he straightens up, smiles, extends his arm to Angelica, once again indistinguishable in his biological manifestation from the virtual Lord of the Orient.

McPherson looks through his handy arsenal and selects from it a steel spike of sarcasm.

"You are going to a duel, not to your enthronement."

“Appearances, my dear, appearances. Besides, you will come with me.”

“Where?”

Zamoyski leans over and whispers in her ear:

“To the end.”

Angelica looks at him suspiciously. Adam smiles, because he smiles almost always now — but is the irony frozen on his lips enough to turn the words into a joke?

“I’m not at all sure I feel like this ever-increasing cosmic ride...”

“That’s not what I meant.”

He raises his hand, a bird lands on it. Angelica herself takes the roll of paper from its beak. The bird soars with a scream into the blue.

With his left hand, Zamoyski conjures sunglasses out of thin air, copying Angelica’s gesture — he’s the only one allowed to perform such indecent acts of magic here, he has the Key.

E call to him from the lawn, he raises his hand reassuringly.

Angelica squints in the sun. It is not without effort that she reads the highlighted fragment of next year’s report from the Gnosis Inc. Time Well:

NEITHER PHOEBE ADAM ZAMOYSKU AND THEIR WIFE

And only one thought, as I nervously touch the hard paper in my fingers: So, after all. So quickly!

Because she expected it. What’s more: she expected it. From the moment she installed the connection network on her brain - despite loud jokes and promises made to the mirror - she knew: she would not be able to resist; neither she nor Zamoyski. It is too strong, too beautiful, too tempting - another stage on the road to perfection, another step on the stairs from animal to God. You cannot escape, you cannot forget, stop thinking, stop dreaming, once you have entered this path, and each step on it is so obvious.

The longing is almost physical, the body, the mind - they yearn for UI, desire

it, stretch towards it like a plant towards the light. Who renounces perfection, gives up the ideal for nothing?

Imperfection hurts.

In the meantime, however...

Black trousers, black loafers, black glasses, a caftan like the ocean at dusk - stepping down from the terrace onto the lawn full of guests, with Stahs Angelica McPherson at his side, Adam smiles ironically, so wonderfully flawed, so brazenly human.

END OF THE FIRST TERM

July 1998 - March 2000 (May 2004)

If our world is really something that organizes itself, then life in the universe cannot be considered a random and unimportant phenomenon; we must realize its omnipresent expansiveness, which makes it possible for it to enter at any moment to any place in the cosmos, even through the smallest crack, and when it does appear, it will seize every opportunity, every means, to reach the limit of possibilities.

Matter is not merely a dragging weight, a mud in which one sinks, a thorny bush blocking the path. Taken in itself, independently of our environment and choice, it is simply a slope, which one can climb up as well as descend. By our inclusion in the universe, each of us is placed in these areas or on their slope at a certain special point, dependent as much on the moment of the world's history as on the earthly place of our birth and our individual vocation. From this point on, the task assigned to us in life consists in rising to the light, and therefore in passing, in order to reach God, a certain series of created realities, which are not really obstacles, but points of support for rising higher and higher, intermediaries to be used, food to be consumed, vital juices to be purified, elements to be embraced and drawn after us.

Raise me up then, matter, to those heights, through struggle and separation and death; raise me up until, at long last, it becomes possible for me to embrace the universe in perfect chastity.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

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